Clients’ cultural symbols, shields/filters & spirit in response to cultural oppression: turning lemons into lemonade

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This presentation will highlight the value of creatively engaging clients' cultural symbols and applying cultural shields/filters when responding to clients' concerns living with cultural oppression. We will also address how to deepen our awareness of clients and ourselves. Basic terms will be discussed such as cultural competence, microaggressions & strategies that open or close conversations about diversity. Cultural filters & shields as tools to connect with clients will be showcased.

It is imperative that counselors/educators go beyond a superficial level of communication when working with clients of diverse backgrounds.

Sustaining authentic communication is even more critical when working with clients exposed to oppressive circumstances.

- Key goal: Facilitate that our clients focus on their true desires/aspirations and cultivate gratitude for an empowered living. (Shaw, 2016).
Essential concept: critical consciousness

- Paulo Freire’s concept of critical consciousness allow clients and especially those that are part of
disenfranchised groups to act as active, critical thinkers (Davis, 2018; Currie 1972)
- CC is part of Freire’s critical pedagogy. Freire was a political refugee from the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985) who worked abroad in both South and North America, and Europe and Africa. This journey inspired him to develop this approach (Freire, 1970, 1974).
- Critical pedagogy (CP) is commonly understood as an approach to education that, in brief, defines education as reflection and action. It urges for reflection, dialogue, and action, as well as a focus on everyday culture and democratic citizenship (Guilherme, 2002).
- When one applies CC, the client leads the counseling process.
- Clients gradually defines the problem of oppression as a failure to recognize others as persons.
- The client generates creative solutions to his/her problem (i.e. domestic violence, depression, loss of loved one, police brutality)
- Two stages:
  - 1) the oppressed unveils the world of oppression and through praxis commit herself to its transformation;
  - 2) Clients commit themselves to the expulsion of the myths created and sustained by the old order.
What is counseling’s ultimate end?

“It is chilling to contemplate therapy being used widely to conspire with silence by rendering history invisible and trivializing the symptoms (forms of telling) of injustice by managing them “as complaints”. In such circumstances, the culture that therapy helps to create is invested in denial, repression, and abuse of power”. (Rossiter, 2000)

“When we can identify and understand how people create and sustain such an oppressive world, we have gained important tools we can use to change it”. (Aguinaldo, 2008, pg. 94)
Culture & cultural competency

- Culture = behaviors, attitudes, feelings & cognitions related to our identities living in the world and embedded in the social context. It organizes how groups and individuals within a particular group behave, think, and feel.
- (Hays & Erford, 2014)
- Cultural competency = To become a culturally competent professional, it is not a quick process or unidimensional fix.
- In order to become culturally competent, we welcome the process of learning about others we serve. How?
  - Having curiosity: savoring the time as we listen to the client’s feedback (verbal & especially non-verbal)
  - Cultivating openness via widening the way you observe their life experiences.
  - Buddhist sages argue that we do not learn from experience.
  - True learning mostly depends on our willingness to experience.
- Above all, we humbly recognize: 1) WE DO NOT KNOW; 2) WE OPEN UP TO WHAT IT IS THAT WE NEED TO LEARN.
Looking underneath the surface

- Going beyond the 1st level awareness is fundamental to being culturally competent (CC).
- CC requires many levels of understanding (awareness is just the 1st level).
- Gaining CC means being attentive and becoming informed about social issues affecting & the cultural contexts that impact the clients/communities we serve.
- In order to grasp the cultural context of our clients, we must ask basic questions of those we serve.
Asking meaningful questions

- Examples:
  - What is good about being a Latina living in the USA?
  - What is your best coping strategy when dealing with police brutality?
  - Are you spiritual, religious, spiritual/religious or something else?
  - How your culture helps you in dealing with depression?
  - How your culture may not help you in dealing with body-shaming?
  - Have you been to counseling before? What worked? What didn’t?
  - What I should know about you so that I can provide the most useful counseling to you/your family?
Careful listening is key

- What I heard you say was that.......
- Tell me more what you meant by......
- What angered you about....?
- What’s familiar about.....?
- Tell me about feeling invisible....
- What do you need or want from......?
Varnier’s quote (1998)

- "...love and respect, like fear and prejudice, are legacies passed on from one person to another. The movement from seeking approval to taking responsibility, to being open to those who are different, implies a shift of consciousness" (p. 81-82).
Defining spirituality

“Spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred.” (Pulchaski et. al., 2009)

“Spirituality means any experience that is thought to bring the experiencer into contact with the divine (in other words, not just any experience that feels meaningful).” (Beauregard & O’Leary, 2009).

In spirituality, the questions are: where do I personally find meaning, connection, and value?

In religion, the questions are: what rites should I follow? what is right/wrong?
Comparing spirituality & religiosity

- Spirituality
  - Where do I find meaning?
  - How do I feel connected?
  - How should I live?

- Religion
  - What practices, rites, or rituals should I follow?
  - What is right and wrong?
  - What is true and false?

- Belief
- Comfort
- Reflection
- Ethics
- Awe
Active spirituality: significance

“What I have learned in these seven decades on this earth is that these are the times when we are at a crossroads...a precipice...when we must decide whether we are capable and even willing to living together in peace or will we finally, with our last breath of arrogance... be destroyed by our hatred and fears. You see, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and even the Bible and the Koran are in fact, only pieces of paper. And grand words like democracy and freedom, respect and caring, and love thy neighbor, only become reality if we choose to make them so. Not only when it is convenient or is a holiday but is practiced every day and with every person we meet.”

(Lea Mun Wah, 2020)
Active spirituality counts

Developing an action-oriented spirituality helps us deal with oppression & increases our chances of overcoming!
Interaction between emotional & spiritual health

- Many practices recommended for cultivating spirituality are similar to those recommended for improving emotional well-being.
- Emotional and spiritual well-being influence one another.
- Spirituality is about seeking a meaningful connection with something bigger than yourself, which can result in positive emotions, such as peace, awe, contentment, gratitude, and acceptance.
- Emotional health is about cultivating a positive state of mind, which can broaden your outlook to recognize and incorporate a connection to something larger than yourself.
Clients’ spiritual engagement

- Is the client spiritual? Religious? Both? Neither?
- Explore how the client’s spirituality influences his/her coping with mental health stressors/symptoms.
- Explore how the client transforms spiritual values into action.
- Ask when has spirituality facilitated or diminished clients’ effective response to life problems.
- Inquire whether spirituality has helped/impeded the client in dealing with oppressive situations.
- Has there been any time where the client “renounced” to spirituality/religiosity? What is the takeaway?
- Elicit client’s most important life goal. Clarify whether spirituality/religiosity may help the client achieve this goal.
Daily oppression: dealing with micro aggressions

- Defining micro aggressions:

  “Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignity, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates hostile racial slights and insults to the target person or group. These messages are typically derogatory, or negative about a person’s racial, gender, sexual-orientation, social class, and religious orientation. The message may target person or group or both at the same time. “(Sue et al, 2007)

- These interactions are pervasive and automatic, often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and “neutral” messages.

- At times, the message is accompanied by dismissive looks, gestures, and tones.

- Micro aggressions have an insidious and significant negative impact in people of color’s physical and mental health. Unfortunately, these are not limited to human encounters.

Micro aggressions—insidious oppression

- Alien in one’s land—When Asian Americans and Latinos are assumed to be foreign-born (Example: “Asking an Asian American born and raised here to teach other American words in their native language.”)
- Ascription of intelligence—Assigning intelligence to a person of color based on their race (Example: “You are a credit to your race”)
- Color blindness—Not acknowledging the race of a person of color (Example: “When I look at you, I don’t see color.”)
- Assumption of criminal status—A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on race.

- Denial of individual racism—A person with high social status who denies his/her racial biases. (Example: “I’m not racist. I have several Black friends.”)
- Myth of meritocracy—Statements which assert that race does not play a role in life successes. (Example: “Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough.”)
- Turning cultural values/communication styles into pathology—Using the values and communication styles of the dominant groups as ideal standards and considering any deviation from this standard as pathological. (Example: “To an Asian or Native American person “why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal. Speak up more.”)
- Second-class status—When a White person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color. (Example: “Having a taxi cab passes a person of color and pick up a White passenger.”)

- Environmental invalidation—Macro-level aggressions that occur at the systemic and environmental levels.
- Example: Overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color (Sue et. al. [2007]).
Best antidote against microaggressions: welcoming clients’ cultural wealth

◦ The cultural wealth produced by clients of diverse groups is typically unacknowledged (Walck, 2017).

◦ Understanding cultural differences in the US began by focusing on racial disparities and then other marginalized groups were included as gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and social economic status were considered (Sue & Sue, 1999, 2013).

◦ The concept of cultural wealth or capital (Yosso, 2005) was defined as the knowledges that students of color brought with them from their homes/communities into the educational settings.

◦ Six forms of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant.
Six types of cultural wealth

- **Aspirational capital** = “ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” or steadfast optimism (Yosso, 2005, p. 77; Hall & King, 1982).

- **Linguistic capital** = “the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). It also refers to the ability to communicate with storytelling, visual art, music or poetry; and communicating with different audiences.

- **Familial capital** = “engages a commitment to community well-being and expands the concept of family to include a broader understanding of kinship” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

- **Social capital** = “networks of people and community resources”. These peers & social contacts provide support to navigate through society’s institutions. (*Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

- **Navigational capital** = “the skills of maneuvering through social institutions ... not created with communities of color in mind” which highlights endurance “and... individual agency within institutional constraints” (*Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

- **Resistant capital** = notion refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality (*p.80). This includes “cultural knowledge of the structures of racism and motivation to transform such oppressive structures” (*p. 81). An example is when “parents of color are consciously instructing their children to engage in behaviors and maintain attitudes that challenge the status quo” (* p. 81). [*Yosso, 2005]*)
Key paths to spiritual endurance

• Self-knowledge
• Self-appreciation
• Vision
• Purpose power
• Commitment
• Belief system
Defining each path for spiritual endurance

- Self-knowledge = ability of the person to know himself/herself in key areas
- Self-appreciation = knowing what you’re good at, what you offer to the world, understanding that the world wants you to deliver your gifts
- Vision = picture of oneself that points in the direction he/she must move, knowing where one is going, despite fear.
- Purpose power = having a sense of purpose helps one believe life is worth living
- Commitment = having the focus on completing things, promising to oneself that one will do whatever it takes.
- Belief system = understanding what’s contained in one’s belief system. This deep seated knowledge allows the client to direct one’s life and become one’s reality. Only by changing one’s belief system can one change his/her reality.
- Example of a belief system: “I believe it when I see it.”
Working with clients’ cultural strengths

- Although internalized oppression and stereotype threats may impede a helping relationship, there are ways of offset or mitigate these forces when working with clients from a broad array of multicultural backgrounds:

- 1. Helping client to connect with their strengths (positive mental switch):

  - Help the client who experience oppression on any given day to do a mental switch to something positive by asking the client to identify 1 or 2 cultural strengths.

  - Example: Tell me about the positive qualities you see about people in your ethnic group, gender, social class, sexual orientation, or religious group.

  - Example: What makes you proud of being African American, a woman, Asian American, a Muslim, a member of the deaf community, a transgender, a person from your specific social class?
Use of cultural symbols

- There is great value in using the clients’ cultural heroes & cultural symbols. They are one of the best antidote against oppression and stereotype threat.

- Counselor can help a client to evoke cultural heroes/symbols to offset the forces that mitigate their mental health and resilience and work against stereotype threats. Examples:
  - a. Who are the people whom you admire in your culture? What is an item that may represent your cultural strength?
  - b. How have your cultural heroes handled comparable situations to the one you’re currently facing?
  - c. Is there anything you would like to adapt or adopt in problem solving from your cultural hero?
  - d. Is there any way we can use your cultural symbol to motivate you in counseling?

- Question: What superhero power would you like to have? How would you use it when dealing with a challenging situation today?
Cultural shields in eliciting clients’ coping and active spirituality

- Sometimes, clients who endure the second source of oppression may feel demoralized and at times, fighting this internalized oppression can be quite difficult to overcome.

- Sometimes, these clients become very angry when microaggressions are sent their way.

- **Remind them that they can create a mental shield:**

  - Prepare a 10 x 12 piece of plastic and write this label on it “Shield against unfair words and racism”

  - Counselor & client can role-play a difficult situation in which the client is forced to deal with racist comments.

  - Client eventually may learn that they always carry this shield even when it is invisible and they can put it up whenever they are dealing with oppressive comments.

  - Goal is for the client to practice and learn to deflect negative comments instead of absorbing them and feeling hurt & angry.

- Negative comments can reflect ethnocentrism/sexism/racism/classism/ableism/heterosexism and/or transphobic microaggressions making it difficult for clients to be effective.
Creative use of cultural filters

- The use of a filter allows the client to effectively deal with injustice and ethno-centric microaggressions.

- The difference between the shield and a filter is that the shield blocks the destructive comments while the filter does permit some materials to pass through.

- The filter allows the good stuff to pass through and traps the bad stuff in the filter.

- This filter technique is especially useful in employment situations.
Let’s practice

Case #1: Camille’s case

Camille is a 17 year old Latina. She has attended counseling for 18 months. She suffers from depression. She talks about her poor communication with mom. Her mom separated from her father when she was a child because of his abusive behavior against the family. She has a history of hospitalization for suicidal thoughts and self harm.

When attending counseling, Camille has been able to increase her level of awareness, clarify her self-identity and work on her self-esteem. Now she is more selective in whom she calls a friend. She wants to work in improving communication with her mother. Mother divorced her second husband and is currently involved in a 3rd relationship. Camille does not get along with mom’s third partner. She also talks about her cultural identity. Recently she recognized that her father is from Puerto Rico and her mom is from Mexico and then she clarifies that she is born here. She disclosed that part of her conflict with Mom is that the mother had a neighbor come and practice a cleansing ritual to “expulse the devil energy” out of Camille. Camille told the counselor that she is not “evil”. As the counseling progressed, Camille went from resenting her mother’s strict way of practicing religious values to going to a church in her neighborhood on her own. When the counselor asked her what was her reason to go to church, Camille explained that she needed to connect with God.

In terms of her academics, she has been part of special education because of learning difficulties. She also talks about having difficulties with peers. According to her, she does not have friends. People call her “the quiet girl” Camille says that peers call her the “Latin” girl. Being called this label makes her feel unaccepted. She complains that teachers do not support her when these things go on. She does not feel support from her peers, too. Camille is graduating this year and is not sure if she will attend her virtual graduation.

Questions:

1) Which one of the 6 cultural wealths is evident in how Camille deals with her family and school challenges?

2) How would you describe Camille’s spiritual/religious dimensión? How her growth in counseling paralleled her spiritual/religious journey?
Case 2 - Kayla

- Kayla is a 12-year-old, African American, cis gender, female, who resides in an inner-city neighborhood with her father, her father’s girlfriend, and her older brother. At the time of treatment, clinical diagnosis included Attention Deficit Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Anxiety, and Oppositional Defiant disorder (ODD). Kayla had been removed from her district school and placed into an alternative behavioral school at the age of 6, due to severe disruptions in the classroom, tantrums, and violent outbursts. Client had no history of hospitalizations, and upon meeting Kayla she had worked with many clinicians over the years and did not appear very trusting. Additionally, Kayla’s father was not very trusting of school staff, in a past incident the school had called DCP&P after Kayla reported he had spanked her.

- Kayla had primarily been raised by her paternal grandmother and her father. Kayla’s mother struggled with addiction throughout her pregnancy with Kayla and was in and out of incarceration. Her mother had never been in her life and Kayla had no contact with her. At the age of 9 Kayla’s grandmother died and her father became her primary caretaker. While her and her father got along fairly well, her father was very strict, disclosing he was strict because he was “afraid she would turn out like her mother”.

At home Kayla’s relationship with her father’s girlfriend was strained and was often the source of upset upon entering school each day. At school her teachers referred to her as a “nice girl until she got upset or didn’t get her way”.

Often, she was viewed as being “manipulative” or acting “immature for her age” when she would tantrum or become volatile. When asked about the prospect of her returning to her district school, her teacher felt she probably would never return to district.

Counselor began working with Kayla when she was 10, at which point she had been at the alternative school for approximately 4 years. To start Kayla was often very hyperactive in the mornings, and by the afternoon she usually would be much calmer. She often exhibited mood swings throughout the day and was very easily agitated or upset by even minor interactions or occurrences, which often led to outburst, throwing things, and hitting others. It was important to work with Kayla on being able to express frustrations in a more meaningful way.
Case 2 Kayla (part 2)

- With a lot of creativity, Kayla was able to use art, music, and some of her own creativity to begin express her emotions. It was important to empower Kayla to feel as though she had a voice and help her to feel heard. Working with Kayla’s father closely included helping him with additional parenting skills to help Kayla at home. This included helping dad with better communication skills that he could model at home. Dad also became the buffer between Kayla and his girlfriend and began to insist better communication overall in the household. As for the school staff it was important to work closely with Kayla’s teacher and classroom aide in utilizing more strength-based language and providing more opportunities for client to feel encouraged.

- Counselor was able to cultivate a small network of individuals that helped Kayla to continue to meet her goals each day in school. When there was emotional upset, Kayla became much better at seeking out individuals in her network to talk with. Much of the school staff continued to doubt Kayla’s ability to return to district even with the continued improvements in her behaviors. However, after having worked with Kayla for a little over 1 and a half years, Kayla was able to return to her district school. Counselor worked closely with her school district to insure a smooth and slow transition, and eventually Kayla returned to her district fulltime. Kayla continues to remain in district and continues to do well.

- Questions:
  - What multicultural variables & sources of oppression do you think are relevant in this case?
  - How has Kayla’s strengths and challenges been shaped by her worldview and cultural background?
**Takeaways**

Members of marginalized groups confront multiple stressors on a daily basis and even when they may benefit from professional support, their levels of distrust and caution interfere with their use of professional resources to deal with their physical, mental & spiritual health challenges.

This presentation discussed the need to develop our cultural competence and become methodic/deep listeners in search for clients’ hidden strengths and wisdom. This strategy may make counseling more attractive & meaningful for clients in marginalized communities.

Key strategies were discussed to elicit clients’ engagement and spiritual endurance by invoking clients’ strengths, use of cultural symbols, cultural shields and filters to draw clients’ cognitive/spiritual wisdom and foster empowered living within oppressive circumstances.
**References (1)**


- Davis, J. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed Chapter 1.* Lit Charts LLC.


References (2)


