Cultural Diversity: Implications for Theory and Practice

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About the Author
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Abstract
This paper argues that cultural diversity and contextual factors should be at the core of theoretical and clinical formulations. In the same way that women’s normative processes can be considered deviant, other cultures’, races’ and socioeconomic classes’ “normative” processes have also been considered deviant by mainstream psychological and psychiatric theories. Some basic conclusions and implications are derived from the literature on how women’s behavior becomes regulated by cultural values, beliefs and practices. Several suggestions are presented regarding clinical work with clients of diverse backgrounds. Finally, several implications are identified for the application of cultural diversity as a core component of a relational framework.

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face when we are conducting clinical interventions with clients of diverse backgrounds.

The Challenge of cultural diversity

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, we take for granted that events in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, or Japan have immediate effects on our daily lives. Examining the advances in communication and the global movement toward economic, political, and ecological interdependence, we would predict that the pressure for diverse cultures to interact, understand, accept, and maybe modify each other will be more the norm than the exception in the decades, if not the centuries, to come. Thus, for us to start consistently incorporating cultural diversity as a framework in our formulations is to be, again, at the forefront of a necessary movement and in a position to prevent conflicts that can arise as a consequence of such necessary crosscultural interactions.

But we do not have to go beyond our territorial boundaries to face the challenge posed to us by cultural diversity. Just walk into most inner cities in the United States today and face the pockets of thriving and nonthriving ethnic communities where different sets of values, beliefs, customs, foods, and languages are an integral part of day-to-day living. Rather than a melting pot, we are becoming a tossed salad; as new waves of immigrants keep arriving at our borders, our subpopulations retain strong cultural values through generations (in spite of superficial assimilation and integration into the American Way). It is clear that cultural diversity is here to stay. Some samples from statistics of population growth and projections give us a clear picture of what we might expect in the future.

-In 1985, census figures revealed that one of every seventeen women in the United States was Hispanic (Amaro & Russo, 1987).

-By the year 2,000 (only eight years from now), one third of all children in the United States will be nonwhite (Report from the National Commission on Children, 1990).

-The growth of Hispanic and Asian populations in this country has been especially rapid in the past decade, partially because of immigration, but also because of higher fertility rates. For example, in 1982, the fertility rate for Hispanic women was 96.1 births per 1,000 women 15-44 years old, 48% higher than the rate for non-Hispanic women (Ventura, 1987).

-To reflect on how institutions are changing, Wellesley College reports that out of a total of 578 women enrolled in the class of 1995, 226 (39%) are identified as women of color (Wellesley Statistics, 1991-92).

-Another phenomena that contributes to the prevalence of cultural diversity is the observation that second and third generations which have already become “assimilated” become interested in the ancestral heritage and return to the original culture to selectively acquire some of its traits while rejecting others (Jaffe & Carreras-Carleton, 1974).

Cultural diversity with its challenges for interaction, understanding, acceptance, and possible modification is here to stay.

Culture and the regulation of human behavior

The literature on developmental studies conducted in other cultures can shed some light on how human beings become part of a cultural system. We need to understand and appreciate the process of acquisition of patterns of behavior, if we are going to be effective agents of change. Crosscultural studies of early development point out that parents’ interactions with their children are partly shaped by the instrumental competencies that adults are expected to have in a given population (Levine, 1977), and that these competencies vary as functions of culture, history, and economic and social situation.

Adults, consciously or unconsciously, try to inculcate, through various child-rearing techniques, cognitive, linguistic, motivational, and social competencies that are considered relevant to their cultural milieu. A good example is the pioneer work by William Caudill and his colleagues (e.g. Caudill & Schooler, 1973) which documents how early in life this process starts. Caudill observed that by three to four months of age, American and Japanese infants and their mothers showed very distinct patterns of behavioral interactions that reflected the general expectations for adult behavior in the two cultures — in the United States, individuals were to be physically and verbally assertive; in Japan they should be physically and verbally restrained. American mothers tended to do more looking at, positioning the body of, and chatting to their infants. Japanese mothers, on the contrary, did more carrying, rocking, and lulling or continuous soothing of their infants. As a consequence, the American infants showed greater amounts of gross bodily activity, play, and happy vocalizations, while the Japanese infants seemed passive, having only more unhappy vocalizations.

This example shows how, from the infancy period,