**Culture**

The overall importance culture in counseling is well known, however this concept can at times be misunderstood and misapplied. Before going further, let's define culture:

**Culture**: n. The sum of attitudes, customs and beliefs that distinguishes one group of people from another. Culture is transmitted through language, material objects, ritual, institutions and art, from one generation to the next

As we know, good counseling is all about understanding and connecting with the wide variety of people that we are trying to help. An individual's culture is a significant part of who that unique person is, which thus explains the importance of paying attention to culture in engagement and in the overall counseling process. A good way to start in this discussion about giving attention to the importance of cultural in all forms of counseling, is to consider the well-known concept of "cultural competence". Let us start by reviewing one definition of this key term:

**Cultural competence:** The ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with persons from cultures and/or belief systems other than one's own

In summary, cultural competence is the accepted terminology used to describe the capability, proficiency and overall set of skills and instincts needed to connect with people on an interpersonal level, who may be different than oneself. It only makes sense that cultural competence is a much needed ability for all counselors because of the wide variety of people we work with come from diverse backgrounds with boundless types of individual differences. Sadly though, this idea of increasing cultural competence in the counseling setting has been misconceived by some in the past.

For about the first half of my career as a social worker, which started in the early 1990's, the cultural competence training I experienced often consisted of education about a variety of preconceived "rules" and norms associated with a various of ethnicities. Some of these educational "tips" and guidelines for cultural competence included a collection of examples that resembled the following:

- "Never look someone from [*this culture*] in the eye because it is viewed as a sign of disrespect"
- "Always keep in mind that people from [*this culture*] value family and tradition more than anything else"

The mistake some were making years ago when teaching cultural competence in this way was to base the idea of cultural competence on a specific, commonly accepted body of knowledge about cultural norms. In other words, the prevailing message about cultural competence years ago way that to be culturally competent, a counselor had to learn as much as possible about the culture of the individuals and families he or she was serving. To work with someone who was Japanese, for example, being culturally competent was a direct function of how much that person knew about Japanese culture. The same was true with this mindset for any culture. One's degree of knowledge about the norms, mores, and traditions of a wide variety of cultures was basis for determining one's overall level of cultural competence.

Although predetermined knowledge of cultural norms, beliefs, traditions and other practices is helpful, there are several problems with that approach to defining and measuring cultural competence. First, if one is not careful, this overgeneralized view on cultural competence can perpetuate the very stereotypes that we want to avoid when it comes to culture and ethnicity. It can do more damage than good to make assumptions that an individual associated with a culture, fits the stereotypical example

of that culture. An example from my own personal experience illustrates this phenomenon. Some people see my appearance and hear my last name, Pecoraro, and they often assume that I am "Italian" from a cultural perspective. Often I need to inform individuals in these circumstances that I am Italian by heritage on my father's side, but culturally speaking I am not at all Italian as I was raised primarily by my mother who is not Italian. If a counselor was working with me as a client, for example, and he or she tried to display cultural competence by treating me as if I knew, understood and practiced traditional Italian-American culture as it is commonly understood, then that person would be missing the mark. I may look Italian and have an Italian last name but in reality, traditional Italian culture had little impact on my past or present life.

At the risk of sounding like a contradiction, there is great value in knowing and understanding the culture of the client with whom you are working with in a counseling setting. When you know and understand someone else's culture that can assist greatly in the engagement process. Connecting with our clients on a cultural level can be constructive in establishing an environment of empathy and understanding. However, the key point is that while knowing and understanding another individual's culture is helpful *it is not a requirement for cultural competence.* Remember, that knowledge of someone's culture can actually work against the therapist if the client does not identify with the cultural group that they appear to be a part of. A good example of this is the black individual who was raised in a primarily white environment or the white individual raised in a primarily black environment who identifies more with the cultural traditions of their childhood environment as opposed to what one may expect based on their outward appearance. Cultural competence means never relying on assumptions. Cultural competence should not be "*perception-centered*" which implies basing one's approach to culture solely on what we observe visibly. The old adage "Don't judge a book by its cover" is an appropriate rule of thumb in this regard.

So what then is at the core of cultural competence? Although knowledge, experience, and understanding of various cultures can be extremely helpful, cultural competence is more about *attitude* than anything else. Cultural competence needs to be person-centered as opposed to perception-centered or based on assumptions. As stated already, it can be helpful to research the culture of those we are working with in order to increase understanding, however the best resource for understanding a client's culture is the client him (or her) self. A person-centered attitude toward culture in treatment focuses on starting with our client's perception of his or her culture instead of our own.

***What is involved with a person-centered view of cultural competence?***

**Understanding over Assumption** – Focusing on trying to learn about a client's culture based on his or her unique explanation and experience does a lot more positive toward the engagement process than trying to make assumptions about a client's culture based on observations or preconceptions. Allowing the client to educate you about his or her culture, particularly how it affects the client on a personal level, is an excellent way to establish and maintain rapport. For example, consider working with a client who describes himself as "Hispanic". Someone describing himself as Hispanic could be from Puerto Rico, South America, Spain, the Dominican Republic or a wide variety other places across the map, all of which can be very different culturally speaking. The person could be first generation, second generation, third generation or even later generation in this country which also could greatly impact how Hispanic culture may have impacted this client's life. Another consideration mentioned earlier is one's environment. For example, I can remember working with an adopted black client who was raised by a white family in a predominantly white neighborhood who privately confessed to feeling anxious when she was around groups of other black individuals due to her lack

of experience growing up in that situation. I can also remember a white client who explained that when he moved out of the primarily black neighborhood he grew up in, he was not able to identify socially with other groups of white individuals thus making it a struggle for him to make friends in his new environment. In both of these examples the experience of being "white" or "black" was highly unique to these individuals contrary to what someone may assume based on appearance. All of these examples illustrate the need for the clinician to use the client as the source for personal information about his or her unique perception and experience of culture as opposed to a utilizing a "textbook" or dogmatic view of the client's culture.

Keep in mind that counselor to client matching is also often based on assumptions about culture. For example, automatically concluding that a black client will do better with a black therapist or a Jewish client will do better with a Jewish therapist (or any other effort to assume that matching client and counselor culture automatically will increase rapport) can backfire especially when based entirely on assumptions. It makes so much more sense to simply start with client preference and work from there. The same mentality holds true for clients and counselors who are or aren't "in recovery". Even though there is a specific culture associated with recovery, a counselor does not need to be in recovery him or herself in order to help a client in recovery. In short, when pairing a client with a counselor, by automatically assuming that they will bond better if they are the same race, ethnicity, religion, or other cultural condition can be highly misleading.

Read: How to Handle the "Are You in Recovery?" Question if you are Not in Recovery

**Broadening the View of Culture –** In many areas, when a client in mental health or substance abuse treatment is asked how he or she feels that culture may impact treatment, many individuals may find it difficult to answer that question. This is because culture is often limited to being viewed in terms of *ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion, language and country of origin.* Some individuals may see these traditional cultural categories as greatly impacting their lives which could directly affect treatment. A practicing orthodox Jewish client informing his or her therapist that he or she cannot attend group on the Sabbath would be an example of how religion would be a significant cultural factor to consider. Another obvious example of how these traditional cultural categories would affect treatment would be the client who primarily speaks a foreign language who would obviously do much better with a bilingual therapist. It is important to assess culture in these conventional areas, however just viewing culture in these terms alone is often not enough. Many individuals are greatly affected and influenced by cultural norms and traditions associated with other factors such as *interests* and *hobbies.* Think for example of the powerful influence that music, sports, and various forms of recreation can have on a person's daily life. For example there is specific language, clothing styles and attitudes associated with "hip hop" culture that would be very different than for someone associated with country-western music culture, for example. The same is true for hobbies such as surfing, skateboarding, fishing, and even some video game communities. Comic book collecting has a culture all its own just as there are cultural aspects of football, Star Wars movie fanatics, car enthusiasts, and the list goes on and on. Gang involvement brings with it a culture all its own that can vary greatly between cliques and sets and neighborhoods. It is therefore important to view culture in these broader terms. Someone's identification as a "die-hard Giants fan" may have more to do with getting to know about that person's culture than his or her country of origin, based on the client's unique set of priorities. Often, these hobby-related cultural connections, when deeply entrenched, can even transcend things such as race, religion and ethnicity. For example, an individual's deep involvement with attending punk rock music concerts may mean more to that individual than being Asian or being Catholic, for example. Even 12 Step involvement, when it is truly embraced brings with it a potentially life-altering culture all its own. To truly view culture in a person-centered manner we

need to be open minded to all of the attitudes, customs, and beliefs that are meaningful to each of our clients. One's ethnicity, race, sexual orientation religion, language and country of origin may have a large impact on his or her life, but this list must also be expanded to include hobbies and interests which also in many cases can be just as relevant to really knowing our clients from their personal and unique cultural perspective

**Religious or Spiritual Belief and Engagement**

When it comes to religious or spiritual belief and engagement, the same points that were just outlined with regard to culture and engagement, once again are relevant for consideration:

- Understanding over Assumption &
- Broadening the View of "Belief"

**Understanding over Assumption**: In taking a person-centered view of religious or spiritual belief it is once again critical for the clinician to avoid making assumptions about a client's personal view of belief based solely on outward cues or predetermined sets of customary norms that may be associated with a specific religion or other spiritual belief system. For example, upon learning that a client identifies him/herself as Roman Catholic, Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, or any other specific religion, it can be misleading to then follow lines of assumptive thought such as:

- This client says she is Catholic so that means she is against abortion
- This client told me he is Jewish so he doesn't eat pork and he doesn't work on Saturdays
- The client informed me he is Muslim so he probably reads the Koran and prays five times per day

The truth is that just because someone says they are member of a religion or that they have a specific set of spiritual beliefs, it can be harmful to assume that each individual fits the stereotypical representation of that religious group. That type of viewpoint gets away from the needed person-centered viewpoint on belief for effective engagement. Consider the fact that within any religious group there can be a great deal of variation. The role that belief plays in the life of someone who considers him or herself to be a "Reformed" Jew as opposed to an "Orthodox" Jew can vary greatly. Calling oneself a "Christian" can mean a lot of different things as well, as in the United States alone there are literally thousands of Christian denominations. Someone who converts to Islam in prison in the United States, may have a different view and experience of his or her faith than someone born and raised in a primarily Islamic region in the Middle East, for example. Furthermore, another common practice is the idea of identifying oneself in terms of the religion of one's birth or childhood, which can differ greatly in adulthood. An example of this would be the person who on an assessment identifies himself as belonging to a religious group such as Catholicism only to reveal after further questioning that he no longer attends church and he does not even believe in the teachings of that religion. However, this same person still calls himself "Catholic" when asked because he made his Confirmation as a child but otherwise has just about lost all interest since then thus truly limiting the impact that Catholicism has on his current life.

Also, some people may not identify with any spiritual or religious beliefs when asked, stating that they do not have any specific "faith." Even in the case where someone lacks faith, there can be many reasons why that person came to that conclusion. That individual may have had a negative experience with the religion of their youth, or the person may feel that there are too many unanswered questions about a particular religion to put faith in it or that person may have had life

experiences that turned them off to the concept of god or a higher power. Often that person can explain the logic and reasoning behind their own journey to that personal conclusion. Once again, the overall point is clear in that determining the impact of a person's faith and spiritual beliefs and practices based on assumptions is an ineffective way to approach belief in counseling. Our approach to belief, like culture, must be individualized and person-centered.

Instead, as stated earlier, what is needed is a person-centered approach to belief based on empathy and understanding of our client's personal view of his or her beliefs (as well as doubts or lack of beliefs). Each client is the best source of information about their own sense of belief. Learning about how our client's individualized beliefs influence their attitude, thoughts and behavior is best cultivated through person-centered discussion with our client.

**Broadening the View of Religion and Belief** – This concept of broadening the view of religion and belief is discussed in depth in the 2013 Book "Taking the Escalator: An Alternative to the 12 Steps". The views expressed here are based on that publication. It is a commonly known concept that the idea of belief often is associated with a wider range of views than religion alone. Simply put, just because a person does not identify with a particular religion, does not mean that individual automatically lacks a sense of belief, faith, or belief. Taking this idea a step farther, the Escalator approach to belief broadens this idea by saying that even people who say they are Atheist, Agnostic, or simply not interested in religion, faith or belief, still have a spiritual need in the sense that everyone, even the most staunch Atheist, still in some way is invested in finding meaning and purpose in life. This quest for meaning and purpose, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem, is at the essence of this concept in its most simplistic form. Although spiritual and religious belief in its most active sense is much deeper and complex, this basic need for purpose is an undeniable core concept that just about every human being alive shares in one way or another across the world. Therefore, a client who says "I don't care about faith or spiritual beliefs" or "I don't even think about those types of things" still is likely engaging in some form of pseudo-spiritual practice inadvertently because at a minimum he likely at least wants his life to feel meaningful on some level. As humans, we search, we analyze, we study, we learn, we theorize, we philosophize, we form connections, we create, we explore nature, we love music, we appreciate art, we imagine and we set goals and dream and we strive to make our fantasies into realities. All of these concepts collectively set us apart from animals and constitute the basic building blocks of searching for meaning and purpose in life as well as for learning and defining who we are and who we want to be. When viewing basic belief in this broader context, it is inappropriate to simply "write off" the idea of belief based simply on an initial "I don't care" or "I am not interested" viewpoint expressed by a client. Often that type of response is code for "I don't know" or "I don't understand" spiritual or religious beliefs. Searching for meaning and purpose is simply part of the human experience regardless of one's specific belief system, upbringing or background. Therefore, embracing this broadened viewpoint can help us understand and engage with our clients across an entire spectrum. For additional information on this topic read below:

***The following is an excerpt from Taking the Escalator; Express (2016)*** - To start with, there are people who claim that they do not practice any form of worship. In reality however, just about everyone worships something whether they realize it or not. To understand that better, consider the definition of the word worship:

***Worship****:* adoring reverence or regard

Acts of worship are almost exclusively associated with religion, therefore many people who do not believe in a religion or who believe in one but still don't actively practice their faith will tell you that they do not formally participate in any form of worship. More often than not, that is really not the case. Interestingly many of these same people still do practice worship

unknowingly. For example, by definition, people commonly have "adoring reverence or regard" for all sorts of things including:

- *Pleasurable experiences* – such as eating, drinking, using drugs, sex, etc.
- *Rewarding experiences* – Career/work goals, academics, sports, relationships or sexual "conquests", making money (legal for some, illegal for others, any way they can get it for others)
- *People* – Relationship or sexual partners, sports figures, celebrities, social groups, those with a higher social or economic status

Those are just a few examples. Keep in mind, there is nothing wrong with having high regard for one's spouse, one's job, etc. The difference involved when it comes to something being considered "worship" is when one's adoration for the object of worship supersedes other important life areas or goals. An easy example to consider is drugs. Spend some time with a group of adolescents who smoke marijuana daily, for example. These adolescents will talk about marijuana constantly even "preaching" about its benefits and advantages. They will often draw pictures of marijuana symbols on any piece of paper they can get near. At times, their paraphernalia such as pipes and bongs almost become "sacred" when it comes to the way they care for them. They study about their weed, they praise it, and they love it. It's all strikingly similar to the way a zealous and enthusiastic religious person may choose to express their professed faith.

Therefore, when thinking about the change process, it is important to consider this concept of worship and the greater overall concept of spiritual beliefs and faith. What seems to be innate in humans, regardless of culture, background, economic status, place or origin, etc., is the inborn need for meaning in life. It would be a challenge to find a person who is truly happy who also perceives their own life as meaningless. In the same way, someone who is participating in true upward change and personal development is either finding new meaning to their life that was not there or they are redefining for themselves what will add meaning to their lives. The search for meaning is in fact a conquest of purpose and faith.

**www.takingtheescalator.com**