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## Cultural Competence and Minority Groups

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## **CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND MINORITY GROUPS**

**DESCRIPTION.** The United States is ever changing. Census data suggest Latinos now make up at least 14% of its population. African-Americans account for 13%; Asian Americans, 4%; Whites, 65%; and other races, 4%. By 2050, minority groups are projected to account for more than half of the U.S. population. Dramatic demographic changes, however, are not just limited to ethnic groups. For example, the fastest-growing demographic group is the elderly. Also, the differences between the rich, the middle class, and lower socioeconomic groups continue to grow. More religions and denominational diversity are also seen. With this complexity, the previous emphasis on "minority groups" has transformed to "multiple identities" (Roysircar, Dobbins, & Malloy, 2010, p. 181). Given these substantial shifts, Christian counselors must possess high levels of cultural competence to work effectively with increasingly diverse clients. Therapists need a biblical framework for cultural competence so they can identify counseling mistakes related to culture, consider biblical social justice, and utilize competencies from mental-health professional organizations.

**BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE.** The multicultural literature emphasizes a postmodern, social constructionist worldview. In this worldview, ethics

and values are relative. All values from different cultures are equal. Significant logical problems result. For example, how does one justify the statement that racism is wrong when some cultural groups see racism (and perhaps even genocide) as one of their significant cultural values to be respected? Some values obviously must be better than others, but postmodernism offers no clear standard for making those judgments.

A biblical framework begins with God's Word as the standard. Racism is wrong because all people are created in God's image (*imago Dei*), we are called to treat others as we want to be treated (Mt. 7:12), and loving one another is the second-most important thing we can do in all of life (Mk. 12:28-31). In counseling, to love other people means we must see the world through our clients' eyes and understand their perspectives. Thus, we adopt a learner's perspective with our clients as opposed to an expert when it comes to their culture. We must also endeavor to see each client through God's eyes, with his compassion, grace, standards, and wisdom. Both starting points are critical to prevent counseling miscues.

**COMMON COUNSELING ERRORS.** Counselors who develop cultural competence avoid many mistakes. Three common errors include pathologizing reasonable mistrust, misreading cultural communication, and stereotyping.

At the beginning of treatment, clients who live in the inner city or have experienced racism might display high levels of mistrust. Clinicians sometimes classify this as pathological paranoia when it is actually an effective survival strategy. Specifically, the inner city is filled with danger. Trusting too easily will get you killed. Likewise, clients who have experienced blatant and subtle forms of discrimination learn to constantly read people, testing them to see who can be trusted. Accordingly, the therapist will be tested too.

Clinicians sometimes misread cultural

communication. This is especially common for clients from collectivistic cultures. For example, an enculturated adult Chinese client may consider it impolite to tell the therapist directly when a homework assignment is problematic, but the clinician might interpret the homework noncompliance as resistance. The Chinese client also might feel compelled to discuss life decisions with grandparents and parents. The clinician might interpret this as enmeshment.

In stereotyping, the therapist makes assumptions about the client that are not accurate. Negative assumptions can arise from many sources, including harmful majority culture portrayals of the group, hurtful previous experiences, personal biases, and overgeneralizing from clinical chapters about the client's cultural group. Clinician self-awareness and individualized client assessment reduce this danger.

**BIBLICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE.** Secular social-justice models seek to help disadvantaged groups through systemically altering government policies, changing laws, and modifying private organizational procedures. These models have some merit, but they categorize people along oppressor and victim categories, which may create defensiveness in those classified as oppressors and entitlement in those classified as victims. Secular social-justice proponents themselves also may develop a prideful elitism that can justify, in its extreme form, harming those classified as oppressors. One can examine communism's history to view an example of this.

Biblical social justice does not start with the social system. It starts with God's broken heart for suffering people and his anger at injustice (see, for example, Ps. 10). It continues with individuals and their responsibilities. People make up systems and people possess a fallen nature, which naturally leads to the development of discriminatory social systems. Oppressor, victim, and social-justice proponents alike are called

to recognition of personal sin, individual repentance, and a tangible responsibility to help the needy. All therefore are called to help the suffering. Those who are suffering are responsible to seek the Lord and make choices to improve their situation. Therefore, although there is a place for government programs, the Bible emphasizes the importance of spiritual renewal and individual actions. In addition, the church is called to develop ministries to help (both tangibly and spiritually) those in need. We are our brothers' keepers (Gen. 4:9).

**PROFESSIONALLY RECOGNIZED ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES.** All major mental-health organizations have adopted standards for cultural competence. In professional counseling, the Association for Multicultural Development recommends three key domains in which counselors must develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills for cultural competence (Arredondo et al., 1996).

These domains interconnect for effective therapy. Counselors must be aware of their own cultural values and biases. From a Christian point of view, bias is a by-product of the fallen nature, so self-awareness is consistent with a biblical emphasis on self-examination and repentance. Counselors must also seek to understand the client's worldview. Seeing the world through the client's eyes is a part of loving our neighbors as ourselves. Finally, counselors seek to develop culturally appropriate intervention strategies for their individual clients. This mirrors Paul's emphasis in evangelism on becoming all things to all people that he might win some to Christ (1 Cor. 9:22).

**SUMMARY.** As Christian therapists work with an increasingly diverse client population, the need for cultural competence becomes more apparent. These perceptions and skills can reduce significant counseling errors. Mental-health organizations now have developed cultural competencies

for clinical practice. Secular multicultural frameworks adopt a postmodern perspective filled with pitfalls, but the Bible provides a distinctively Christian approach to cultural competence and social justice.

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## ETHNICITY

**DESCRIPTION.** The United States is one of the most diverse nations in the world (McAuliffe, 2008). The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that the minority population will comprise fully half the U.S. population by the year 2050 (Ethnic Majority, 2010). To fully grasp the human diversity of the United States or any other country, it is important to first understand the social constructs used for making group distinctions. In America, gender, ethnicity, and race are three visual characteristics used to categorize people.

For social scientists, ethnicity is the preferred concept for describing cultural group membership. Race is used to describe groups of people based on physical appearances. The terms *ethnicity* and *ethnic group* refer to groups of people that share ancestry, geography, cultural roots or tribal affiliations, language, and a sense of identity, which define gender roles and determine the food they eat, the way they communicate, the music they enjoy, parenting practices, and their celebration rituals. Individuals within ethnic groups may or may not share the same