

A Snapshot of Cultural Competence in Psychology

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What does it mean to be culturally competent, and where does this term fit within psychological practice? In the context of psychological diagnosis and treatment, cultural considerations are paramount for several reasons. Firstly, they help prevent misdiagnosis, ensuring that individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds receive accurate assessments and appropriate treatment plans. Additionally, cultural concepts offer valuable clinical insights, enhancing psychologists' understanding of their clients' experiences and needs. Incorporating these cultural considerations into the diagnostic process fosters stronger clinical rapport and engagement, ultimately leading to more effective therapeutic interventions.

How do we define culture? Most culture definitions depict culture as the transmission of traditions, lifestyles, coping mechanisms, values, norms, and beliefs conveyed from one generation to another (H. Betancourt & Lo ´pez, 1993; Guarnaccia & Rodriguez, 1996; Howard, 1991; Miranda, Nakamura, & Bernal, 2003; Thompson, 2005; Whaley, 2003). In Aotearoa, culture may be defined by the actions and beliefs of its people, encompassing their language, sense of belonging, spirituality, engagement in cultural activities, participation in governance, and the wellbeing of various communities (Stats NZ, n.d.). A holistic view highlights the interconnectedness of these elements in shaping cultural identity and experiences.

Recognising and incorporating cultural considerations into psychological diagnosis and treatment is crucial for delivering comprehensive and effective mental health care. Tailoring treatments to cultural contexts often results in higher therapeutic efficacy, as these interventions resonate more deeply with clients' values and experiences. From a research perspective, cultural considerations inform clinical research endeavours, enriching our understanding of mental health across diverse populations. They expand on the cultural epidemiology of psychological disorders, demonstrating how cultural factors influence the prevalence and presentation of mental health conditions. Overall, acknowledging cultural contexts enhances diagnostic accuracy and the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions, ultimately leading to improved mental health outcomes.

In counselling psychology, the intervention, therapeutic relationship, and working alliance are foundational elements of the core competencies established by the New Zealand Psychologists Board (NZPB). These competencies require a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills essential for effective practice. Counselling psychologists are expected to have a thorough understanding of specific theories relevant to their field and the capacity to initiate, develop, and maintain therapeutic alliances with clients (New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2018). Additionally, they must be acutely aware of

their own contributions to the therapeutic process, ensuring that their responses are appropriate and reflective of critical self-examination of their practice experiences.

Furthermore, counselling psychologists must be adept at integrating and responding to emergent presenting variables, developing, and applying effective strategies and interventions as necessary. A comprehensive grasp of cultural, social, and political factors is crucial, as it allows psychologists to identify and address variables that may influence interventions. These core competencies accentuate the multifaceted nature of counselling psychology, emphasising the diverse knowledge and skills required for competent practice in this field (New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2018).

In the endeavour to synthesise Pacific belief systems with a counselling psychologists' clinical practice, cultural competence emerges as a fundamental component of clinical competence. This entails not only proficiency in psychological techniques but also a profound sensitivity and insight into the cultural nuances and belief systems of Pacific communities. By embracing cultural competence, psychologists can navigate the complexities of Pacific worldviews and tailor interventions that resonate with the cultural values and practices of Pacific communities.

As a counselling psychologist and a first-generation 'Kiwi' of Tongan descent, it is crucial for the development of a therapeutic relationship that psychologists acknowledge and incorporate a client's cultural background. While it is unreasonable to expect psychologists to possess comprehensive knowledge of all cultures, they should be equipped with the skills to ask pertinent questions that elicit cultural experiences and meanings. To achieve this, a foundational level of cultural knowledge is essential and must be integrated into the training of psychologists at the university level. This cultural competence enables psychologists to effectively engage with clients from diverse backgrounds, fostering a more inclusive and effective therapeutic environment.

In the discourse surrounding cultural and clinical competence, a common assertion is that one cannot possess both simultaneously. However, I contend that clinical competence inherently requires cultural competence. While clinical expectations may occasionally diverge from cultural values, the ability to adapt clinical practice ethically to meet the client's needs and best interests is integral to both cultural and clinical competence. Consider the case of Ema, a young Tongan woman seeking treatment for depression, whose family requests incorporating cultural practices such as lotu (prayer), fakalaumālie (spirituality), and fotofota (traditional massage) into her therapy. Despite Dr. Jones, a Western-trained psychologist, advocating for evidence-based cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), he recognises the significance of Ema's cultural values. Thus, finding a balance between evidence-based clinical judgment and integrating cultural considerations becomes paramount in ensuring Ema's treatment is effective and culturally sensitive.

Dr Jones finds himself at an intersection as he navigates the delicate balance between evidence-based clinical practice and incorporating Ema's cultural healing practices into her treatment plan. On one hand, he is compelled by his professional obligation to provide treatment supported by research, which aligns with his expertise in cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). Yet, Ema and her family adamantly advocate for the inclusion of their cultural practices, emphasising the importance of these traditions in Ema's healing journey. Acknowledging the significance of cultural practices such as the fotofota (traditional massage) conducted by a Kau Faito'o (traditional healer) is crucial in maintaining the therapeutic alliance and optimising treatment outcomes for Ema. Integrating these practices into her treatment plan respects the values of Ema's family and helps preserve the therapeutic relationship. Neglecting to incorporate these cultural elements could jeopardise this relationship, potentially leading to negative impacts on Ema's well-being.

To bridge the gap between evidence-based clinical practice and cultural sensitivity, Dr. Jones recognises the importance of valuing Ema and her family's perspectives and incorporating them into a collaborative treatment approach. This can include inviting Ema or a family member to participate in opening and closing sessions with a lotu (prayer). During the assessment phase, Dr. Jones can take an explorative stance, asking probing questions about fakalaumālie (spirituality) and strategising ways to seamlessly integrate these aspects into the therapy sessions or treatment plan. He can inquire how the fotofota (traditional massage) is progressing and ask how it impacts Ema. This can become a topic of discussion that can strengthen the therapeutic relationship through Dr Jones actively inquiring and showing genuine interest and support in Ema's cultural values and belief systems. By prioritising cultural inclusivity and fostering a collaborative therapeutic environment, Dr. Jones endeavours to honour Ema's cultural identity while providing effective evidence-based treatment.

Counselling psychologists aim to provide comprehensive and culturally responsive therapy, prioritising client well-being. This involves balancing evidence-based interventions with the ethical responsibility to integrate the client's cultural values and beliefs into treatment. A key element in this process is the development of a strong therapeutic relationship, where psychologists work collaboratively with clients to merge evidence-based practices with culturally sensitive care. By fostering a robust therapeutic alliance, counselling psychologists can effectively tailor interventions to the unique needs and cultural preferences of each client, thereby enhancing the efficacy and relevance of the therapeutic process.

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