
Culturally Dislocated Clients: Self-Validation and Cultural Conflict Issues and Counselling Implications

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Abstract

The nature of cultural dislocation is discussed in terms of self-validation issues, cultural conflicts, and cultural attachment. A cultural conflict model is presented, which incorporates two cultural conflict dimensions (i.e., host cultural and home cultural conflicts). Both the counsellor role as client-validator and help-seeking issues are explored, with practical suggestions for increasing helper sensitivity in working with culturally dislocated clients.

Résumé

Cet article examine la nature du bouleversement culturel en fonction des questions de validation de soi, des conflits culturels, et de l'attachement culturel. Cet article décrit aussi un modèle de conflit culturel contenant deux dimensions de conflit (c'est-à-dire des conflits avec la culture du pays qui reçoit et des conflits avec la culture du pays d'origine). Cet article examine aussi le rôle du conseiller dans la validation du client ainsi que les difficultés éprouvées par des clients dans le processus de recherche d'aide. Des suggestions pratiques sont offertes pour renforcer la sensibilité du thérapeute envers des clients qui souffrent d'un bouleversement culturel.

Migrants inevitably face cultural, sociopolitical, and linguistic differences and various emotional and interpersonal consequences when they move to an unfamiliar culture. Various psychological impacts of cultural relocation have been observed among immigrants, sojourners, and foreign students (Church, 1982; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Lysgaard, 1955; Pedersen, 1991). Practical problems and emotional hardships are encountered in various areas, such as communication, finance, employment, schooling, and bicultural family and interpersonal dynamics while adjustment fatigue, discouragement, and depression can be felt by those who are unable to overcome cross-cultural obstacles in their pursuit of personal, academic, and career goals. Refugees experience similar difficulties as well as ambivalence and uncertainty regarding their sociopolitical and economic status in the host country (Westwood & Lawrence 1990; Wehrly, 1990). More recently, the multidimensional nature of the subjective impact of cultural relocation has been discussed, in terms of threats to one's validation system and the experience of undervaluation of self (Ishiyama, 1989).

This paper discusses the nature of cultural dislocation in terms of undervaluation or invalidation of self, cultural conflicts, and cultural attachment. The role of the counsellor and practical areas to be explored in client-validating counselling are presented. It may be noted that the present discussion is not limited to traditionally defined "cultures" such

as Chinese culture, African culture, or native Indian culture; it can be applied to other culturally distinct groups, such as those with a homosexual orientation, physically challenged persons, and rural (vs. urban) communities.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DISLOCATION

Cultural Dislocation

The term “cultural dislocation” is used here to refer to a subjective experience of feeling displaced or not at home in a given sociocultural environment. Cross-cultural adjustment difficulties, which may be experienced both overtly and covertly, often culminate in a rather subjective experience of cultural dislocation. Cultural dislocation is a composite experience of a lack of validation of self and cultural uprootedness, cultural attachment and homesickness, and conflicts based on cultural differences. However, cultural dislocation can also be experienced without necessarily accompanying overt adjustment problems. It also includes undervaluation of the culturally distinct or ethnic self in the host culture (Ishiyama, 1995; Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992). For example, those who have lived for many years in the host culture and achieved a high level of cultural competency and career success may continue to feel culturally misfit and dislocated while finding it too late to return to their home country and restart their career and social life.

Here are some examples. An engineer migrates to another country to be united with his extended family, only to find his professional qualifications are not recognized. He cannot find a comparable job in his new country and he ends up working unhappily as a taxi driver. In another example, a shy woman moves to another country with her husband who has been transferred to a foreign branch. She experiences intense loneliness and grief after leaving her own career and support network behind in her homeland. Finally, a previously cheerful and well-adjusted child, popular among her friends and teachers, comes to a new school where she encounters racial discrimination and is teased because of her foreign accent and manners. She becomes mildly depressed and withdrawn, and her fond memories and letters from her friends serve as her only source of consolation.

Further, individuals may feel biculturally dislocated; that is, they feel not entirely at home in either the host or home cultural context. As they incorporate the host culture’s values and ways of thinking into their internal system, they begin to form their own bicultural and unique internalized culture, or what may be called “psychoculture.” Their psychoculture is not necessarily fully compatible with either external culture. This may be regarded as part of the bicultural accommodation and assimilation process and the process of forming an internally consistent and integrated model of self and the world. However, individuals may not

be exclusively anchored and absorbed in one cultural system. Those who have a bicultural (or multicultural) background and do not exclusively identify with either culture may experience conflicts with both cultures. They suffer a lack of social validation of self because of their personal uniqueness in not conforming to expectations of either culture.

Self-Validation Model

The model of self-validation (Ishiyama, 1989) has been proposed as a framework for understanding and working with individuals who suffer from negative transition effects. The model is concerned about their phenomenological, experiential world of relations, meanings, values, and feelings. The main focus of the model is on how people experience self-validation, and how validation sources contribute to their well-being. The experience of validation is characterized by any or all of the following thematic components: (a) security, comfort, and support vs. insecurity, discomfort, and abandonment; (b) self-worth and self-acceptance vs. self-deprecation and self-rejection; (c) competence and autonomy vs. incompetence and helplessness; (d) identity and belonging vs. identity loss and alienation; and (e) love, fulfillment, and meaning in life vs. lovelessness, emptiness, and meaninglessness. Cross-cultural adjustment difficulties inevitably involve these psychological themes. Cultural dislocation may therefore manifest as undervaluation or invalidation of self characterized by the negative psychological themes as mentioned above.

One of the model's theoretical premises is that people are motivated to seek validation of self. That is, people seek affirmation of their meaningful personal existence and sense of who they are. They strive for positive valuing of their personal and social existence, and seek to experience themselves in a meaningful, rewarding, familiar and non-chaotic sociocultural environment. In this model, self is regarded as multi-dimensional, consisting of five interrelated dimensions in which self is experienced: physical, familial, social-cultural, transcultural-existential, and transpersonal (Ishiyama, 1995; Ishiyama & Kitayama, 1994). Identities (e.g., ethnic self, career self, and spiritual self) are formed around these dimensions. How they are validated and what validates them are closely connected with the sociocultural context in which they develop their sense of self and the world.

Over time, people develop their own personally unique "validation network." Certain positively perceived relationships, activities (including traditional cultural practices), symbolic and practical objects, and places and landmarks become irreplaceably important to them as significant sources of validation. Personal well-being is thus enhanced by the strength of one's validation network, while the loss of a significant validation source can be profoundly upsetting and threatening to one's well-being and identity. Therefore, another premise of the model is that a

major transition (e.g., moving to an unfamiliar culture) disturbs and threatens the integrity and strength of one's validation network, and that one tends to respond to this by grieving the loss and also trying to restore or compensate somehow for one's damaged validation network.

Undervalidation of Self and Cultural Dislocation

Modes of self-validation are often embedded in one's socio-cultural context, personal upbringing, and personally unique values and meanings. Cultural dislocation is therefore closely associated with the experience of threats to one's self-validation system, such as perceptual disorientation, limited cultural competencies, threatened identity, loss of a social status, academic failure, racisms, and underemployment (Taft, 1977; Hall, 1974; Pedersen, 1991; Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991). Language dysfluency contributes to both communicative frustration and social invalidation (Ishiyama, 1994). One's familiar and stable sense of self and the world may be thus disturbed. While many sources of validation tend to be taken for granted, one becomes acutely aware of their importance when significant sources of self-validation are lost or damaged.

Unfamiliarity and disorientation. Those who are new to the host culture inevitably face social customs and norms and communication difficulties. Instead of dealing with familiar stimuli or communication cues for making appropriate responses, new migrants realize that they have to learn an entirely new set of communication rules (Berry & Annis, 1974; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Hall, 1974; Ruben, 1976). Their previously stable perceptions of self and reality are disturbed, they experience dissonance and inner discomfort. The impact of cultural relocation has been aptly described by Taft (1977) as a composite experience of: (a) strain and fatigue, (b) loss and deprivation, (c) feeling of rejection, (d) identity disturbance, (e) shock of cultural differences, and (f) feeling of impotence.

Uprootedness and homesickness. Cultural relocation involves the experience of being uprooted where important emotional bonds and personal and cultural roots are left behind. Grief and a sense of an existential vacuum are common feelings experienced in this process (Adler, 1975). The devastating realization that they are far away from home and cannot go there whenever they wish to causes some individuals to experience acute pain and anxiety. In some cases, for various reasons, they have no home to return to. While superficial adjustment attempts may be successful, individuals may never feel fully validated for who they are and what they can offer in the host culture.

It is common for migrants to miss their homelands and familiar lifestyles when these things happen (Oberg, 1960; Winkelman, 1994).

Homesickness means not only missing home, but also missing the experience of being validated in a familiar cultural environment and in a personally meaningful way. Culture shock is not just a gap between two cultures; it is more personal and concrete. Individuals learn that how they are treated, evaluated, and validated by others in the host culture follows different cultural rules, and realize that they can no longer have the kind of social validation that they used to enjoy back home.

Identity. Cultural relocation often has a significant and lasting impact on one's self-identity. "Role shock" (Byrnes, 1966) refers to disorientation due to an unexpected discrepancy between two cultures in terms of meanings and values attributed to a certain role, status or role-related behaviour. Further, many migrants and bicultural individuals inevitably come to question who and what they are (Adler, 1975; Arredondo, 1984; Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1989; Sue & Sue, 1990). One's positive sense of self is threatened when what used to elicit positive responses from others is no longer reinforced in the new environment (Ishiyama, 1989; Zaharna, 1989). Inner conflicts and identity confusion may be experienced as one becomes more bicultural or begins to lose the ethnic heritage and be more assimilated into the mainstream culture (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1989). Zaharna (1989) called the process of dealing with confusion and inconsistencies in one's self-perceptions "self-shock."

Cultural Conflicts and Cultural Attachment

Cultural dislocation may be characterized by various conflicts around cultural differences and identity dissonance within self. A cultural conflict model is proposed here; see Figure 1. This bicultural grid may be combined with yet another dimension, cultural attachment, which is a psychological factor that can generate and heighten homesickness and home cultural identity (e.g., ethnic and racial identities). Cultural dislocation can thus be understood in terms of level of cultural conflicts (including internal or psychocultural conflicts), and level of emotional attachment to either home or host culture.

The four types of cultural conflicts are briefly described here. Although these conflict types are compatible with the ethnic identity development model by Atkinson, Morten and Sue (1989), the present model does not propose a specific temporal order as "development" towards bicultural integration and validation of the ethnic self. Individually unique circumstances and personal choices contribute to diverse modes of experiencing and dealing with cultural conflicts. Even culturally competent and well-adjusted migrants may be privately experiencing intercultural conflicts and cultural dislocation to varying degrees. Some may choose not to accommodate or assimilate to the host culture, and decide to live with host cultural conflicts as a compartmentalized dimension of life in a foreign culture.

host culture. A rather benign disagreement with a host culture member, for example, may arouse one's ethnic minority self-awareness and sensitize them to racism in society. This may elevate one's latent host cultural conflict to a strongly negative attitude towards the host culture, and espouse ethnocentrism, and reinforce individuals' ethnic identity and home cultural attachment. In this type of conflict state, clients may feel defensive, sceptical, or even hostile towards the host culture counsellor and his/her culturally inherited values and helping assumptions and approaches.

Home cultural conflict state (LH). Culturally assimilated persons may feel more at home in the host culture, and experience conflicts with aspects of their own home culture. This can cause home cultural dislocation. This state may result from acculturation to and identification with the host culture. However, their conflicts with the home culture may heighten as individuals develop a strong personal value system and disagree with aspects of their own home culture. Promoting the validation of the home cultural self, in this conflict state, may meet client resistance in counselling. This state may manifest as reverse culture shock, resistance to the home culture upon re-entry, and reverse homesickness. Clients may not realize how assimilated and attached they have become to the host culture until they visit their home culture, where they feel as if they are outsiders or are treated as such by host culture members, and start missing their host culture.

Bicultural conflict state (HH). In this state, individuals experience conflicts and ambivalence with both cultures. This may lead to the bicultural dislocation of self and an ethnic or cultural identity crisis. Clients may be tormented by questions such as: "Who am I?" and "Where do I really belong?" This may result in feelings of having no home culture and being biculturally uprooted. It is difficult in this state to reconcile the home cultural self and the host cultural self, and individuals may experience uncomfortable inner dissonance and ambivalence towards both cultures. Other people, who have not experienced such bicultural conflicts and rootlessness, tend to have difficulty understanding these individuals' agony of bicultural dislocation. They may feel very much alone in this struggle. Clients may feel sceptical of the counsellor's ability to understand the complexity and emotional impact and existential meaning of bicultural dislocation when the counsellor fails to demonstrate deep empathic understanding of and respect for their inner struggles.

This bicultural conflict state can stimulate the development of a unique bicultural and transcultural self-identity. They may come to a level of awareness whereby they can articulate and validate their unique transcultural dimension of self as well as a unique blend of two cultures. This signifies evolution and stabilization of their psychoculture or inter

nal “culture” at a new level. Here, they do not necessarily make strong self-identification with, or make causal attribution of their traits and attitudes to any specific community. Instead, they tend to take the ownership of their unique psychoculture, without attributing their personal qualities to an external culture.

COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS

The helper is required to understand clients from their personal and cultural perspectives, and recognize the phenomenological nature of client suffering and problems (e.g., Adler, 1975; Christenson, 1985; Rogers, 1951; Westwood & Borgen, 1988). Be it educational, personal, legal, vocational, or academic counselling, the context in which help-seeking takes place can play a significant role. The counsellor needs to be a client validator (Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992). Clients who have experienced much invalidation and cultural dislocation may be defensively vigilant of signs of invalidation by the helper. The helping relationship must be a place where clients can feel safe and respected, and can freely explore various personal issues and validation themes. This is where they are helped to recognize their personal worth and uniqueness, to mobilize inner resources and expand cultural competencies, and to affirm their identity and sense of belonging. Clients are thus supported in facing their intense or ambivalent feelings and thoughts, finding hope and meaning in the experience of cultural dislocation, and striving towards personal goals.

Although the following suggestions centre around the experience of dislocation in the host culture, most of them apply to bicultural and home cultural dislocation upon re-entry.

Clients' need to be heard and understood. Effective counselling is a validating experience for clients. They feel that they are being taken seriously and heard and understood fully as respectable and worthy individuals. The opposite of this would be an invalidating experience for clients. Many individuals have a need to discuss their experience of cultural dislocation and personal struggles for validation of self. It is extremely important for the client to feel as if another being is giving them their undivided attention. For some clients, counselling is the only place when they have a validating interaction with another caring and empathic individual. The use of validationgram (Ishiyama, 1995) may be helpful as a counselling activity to generate a meaningful discussion on what is important to clients and what sources of validation are missing from the present life.

Overcoming communication barriers and expanding clients' communication competencies. The ease of basic communication is often taken for granted when the helper and client share the same language and cultural frame

of reference. However, facilitating client sharing and exploration is not easily achieved when there are linguistic and cultural barriers between the counsellor and client (Christenson, 1985; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Pedersen & Pedersen, 1985; Westwood & Borgen, 1988). Language dysfluency and misinterpretation, for example, can cause client self-inhibition, counsellor impatience, client defensiveness, mutual communicative fatigue, and premature disengagement (Ishiyama, 1994; Ruben, 1976).

Therefore, the counsellor needs to overcome such barriers and client inhibition, and also to examine his/her culturally based biases and assumptions. Alternative communication activities have been suggested, including the use of drawing, self-expression in the client's mother tongue, and use of photographs and music, and cultural exchange games (Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992; Westwood & Ishiyama, 1990). Communication difficulties experienced during counselling may reflect the nature of clients' difficulties and conflicts with host culture members. The counsellor, therefore, needs to help expand clients' repertoire of culturally appropriate communication skills and prevent unnecessary misunderstanding and communicative frustration (Westwood & Ishiyama, 1990). Within-session communication training and behavioural rehearsal may be incorporated into regular counselling work.

Grief work. As discussed earlier, grieving is part of cultural dislocation. Some clients continue to feel unfinished about leaving their home culture. Clients may be helped at some point in counselling, to acknowledge the nature of loss and painful separation from their familiar environment. Some people have never left their homeland emotionally, even after living for years in a new country. They feel attached to their old lifestyle and environment and resist the new. It may be helpful to ask clients whether or not and how they wish to process their grief, and their preferences should be respected. In some cases, prolonged grieving and preoccupations with the loss experience can prevent their learning practical adjustment, and future-oriented action in the host culture. Therefore, in addition to grief work, the counsellor needs to help client to recognize the task of living in the present reality and to increase cultural competencies.

Recognizing growthful potentials in cultural dislocation. While the experience of cultural dislocation often involves negative affect and obstacles in the practical side of living, its growthful potential also needs to be recognized. Although initially perceived as unpleasant, undesirable, and unrewarding, the personal meaning of such a transition experience may increase its depth. As suggested by some writers (e.g., Adler, 1975; Sue & Sue, 1990; Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992; Zaharna, 1989), it can provide unique opportunities for significant learning and personal growth. If on

is flexible and open, learning new cultural practices and worldviews can be an enriching experience. It can increase one's tolerance for, and appreciation of, cultural and personal diversity. While cultural dislocation is often disorienting and painful, one can acquire a pluralistic perspective, increase personal flexibility (Herr, 1987), and expand one's cognitive and behavioural repertoires.

Respecting the client model of self and the world. Appreciating client worldviews is as important as teaching how the host culture operates. As stressed above, understanding client problems and self-perceptions requires the helper's appreciation of the client's culturally shaped model of self and the world. A broader perspective on self, such as the multi-dimensional model of self as discussed earlier, may be needed when clients experience and define themselves not only at an individualistic level but also at other levels. The helper is often forced to examine his/her "professional encapsulation" or culturally transmitted values and assumptions about helping and life in general when working with clients from other cultures (Pedersen, 1976).

As an example, Japanese corporate persons' identity and self-evaluation are often intimately enmeshed with their corporate roles and work relationships (Brown, 1984; Ishiyama & Kitayama, 1994). The helper needs to understand the sociocultural context of such persons' inner conflicts about priorities on personal and company needs. He/she may lose effectiveness when counselling is based on an assumption that one's happiness should come from self-assertiveness, individualistic success and fulfillment of one's own needs at the expense of risking group membership and social harmony.

Similarly, depressed North American Native Indians can be more effectively helped by using their indigenous, spiritual paradigm of the world (Jilek, 1982). Native clients who follow a spiritual discipline may work better with helpers who appreciate the value of the medicine wheel, sweatlodge, vision quest, and other methods. Effective helping thus requires counsellor appreciation of the client construct of self and the world, instead of imposing the counsellor's culturally encapsulated model.

Sensitivity to clients' help-seeking attitudes. Racial and cultural differences, as well as age and gender-based ones, exist in modes of help-seeking and expectations about helper characteristics and behaviours (e.g., Christenson, 1987; Gibson et al., 1991; Gourash, 1978; Mechanic, 1975). Generally speaking, the less assimilated a person is, the less likely he/she will seek help from host culture services (Allodi, 1978). Although people in general tend to go to their family and close friends for help (Mechanic, 1975), it has been observed that Asians tend to be less willing to seek formal help (Christenson, 1987). The help-provider may be regarded as

an authority and expert who can give directions and advice instead of empathically focusing on client inner dynamics. Therefore, clients may find it rather foreign and threatening to verbalize negative feelings or ideas and emote in front of others or to complain about the family. Pride, shame, guilt, and fears of losing face and social repercussions, among other things, can be obstacles to sharing private problems with the helper.

Private and interpersonally inhibited clients may show anxiety and reluctance to helper attempts to facilitate expressions of feelings. They may insist on receiving instructions and opinions instead. Although introspective work may be considered necessary to explore client feelings and personal meanings from the therapeutic viewpoint, there is no set formula for determining to what extent the helper should fulfill the client expectation of the helper role to provide the best service for them.

A failure to show sensitivity to clients' insecure and uncomfortable feelings about an unfamiliar mode of helping can leave them feeling vulnerable and undervalued, which may add to the clients' culturally dislocated feelings. It can reduce their commitment and openness to the helping process as well as client sharing and risking. Premature termination and unproductive sessions are possible results of not validating client needs for comfort and respect. Being criticized for not speaking clearly or not being open and working hard enough can increase clients' threatened and undervalued feelings. Sensitivity is required to the client's need to sustain pride and self-respect in a culturally compatible manner. For example, an older migrant from Asia or a conservatively stratified society may feel reluctant to be treated informally and called by his/her first name.

For these reasons, the helper needs to be flexible and creative when working with culturally heterogeneous clients who are inhibited about discussing private issues and emoting negative affect before others. A slower pace of moving into the core issues and the use of unobtrusive means of communication and problem-solving may be better received by clients than a faster pace and the use of direct and emotional expressions. This may be particularly important at the stage of rapport building and lowering client defences. Additionally, some clients may prefer to use a symbolic language or to project their problems onto less personal and more external things when seeking help. Therefore, counselling can be more productive when the helper incorporates into his/her repertoire indirect ways of facilitating self-expression and exploring the private world of clients.

CONCLUSION

Perceived threats and damage to one's former validation system are at the base of a negatively perceived transition experience (Ishiyama, 1989,

1995; Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992; Westwood & Ishiyama, 1990). Loss of significant validation sources is often part of cultural disorientation, grief, depression, and low self-esteem. Individuals struggle to survive such adverse emotional states, and try to find new ways of validating themselves, in order to restore a familiar sense of who they are and to create a more rewarding perceptual reality. The issue of self-validation, particularly undervaluation of the cultural self, seems to be a significant life theme throughout the process of dealing with cultural conflicts and other adjustment issues. The counsellor needs to work respectfully and collaboratively with clients, and empathically understand the complex nature of their experience of cultural dislocation and its psychosocial effects. In this process, clients may be helped to acknowledge and explore their feelings and thoughts around cultural dislocation and cultural and intrapersonal conflicts.

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