

Exploring the Importance of Cultural Awareness in Fostering Therapeutic Alliance for Clinical Psychologists Working with Immigrants Seeking Mental Health Services in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract: Immigrants encounter a multitude of mental health challenges that arise from their unique migration experiences and the inherent difficulties associated with adapting to unfamiliar environments. These challenges frequently stem from various forms of trauma, including exposure to violence, persecution, and economic instability, as well as the profound emotional impacts of separation from family, community, and cultural roots. Compounding these issues are language barriers, societal discrimination, and the intense pressure to succeed within a new context, all of which can exacerbate feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression. The increasing diversity among immigrant populations underlines the critical need for a nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to mental health support that takes into consideration their distinct cultural, social, and contextual circumstances. This study aimed to examine the significance of cultural awareness in strengthening the therapeutic alliance between clinical psychologists and immigrant clients. Understanding the rich tapestry of backgrounds and the varied experiences of immigrant individuals is crucial for psychologists to deliver effective, empathetic, and relevant care. This research highlights how an appreciation of cultural differences can greatly enhance communication between clinicians and clients, foster trust, and ultimately improve therapeutic outcomes in clinical settings. It reinforces the notion that culturally informed care is not merely an additive approach but an essential component of effective mental health practice that can bridge the gap between diverse populations and mental health providers.

Keywords: Cultural awareness, Immigrants, Mental health, Therapeutic alliance.

1. Introduction

Global migration has increased dramatically due to war, social instability, climate change, conflict, and economic disparities. This surge in migration has led to increasingly diverse mental health needs among immigrant populations. Immigrants often face unique challenges, including cultural barriers, systemic discrimination, and the stressors associated with resettlement, which can contribute to higher rates of mental health issues like anxiety and depression (Jarvis & Kirmayer, 2023). Addressing these complexities is crucial for effective integration and support. Consequently, their mental

health requirements necessitate tailored healthcare interventions.

Cultural awareness is paramount for clinical psychologists working with immigrant populations, such as those in Nairobi, Kenya. This is so because it would be hard to build rapport with such a population without understanding the culture they come from and how it has shaped their current problems (Hursud, 2024). This idea is supported by (Cook et al. 2016), who assert that culturally aware therapists were capable of cultivating a therapeutic bond with their clients, positively affecting treatment. Similarly, a meta-analysis conducted by Wang et al. (2018) observed that clients' mental health drastically improved when treated by culturally aware psychologists.

A strong therapeutic alliance, built on mutual respect and understanding, is essential for effective psychotherapy, particularly in multicultural contexts. Many theorists view fostering a therapeutic alliance as the catalyst for effective therapy (Corey, 2012). Unintentional biases and cultural insensitivity can hinder this alliance, potentially leading to poor treatment adherence and higher dropout rates among ethnic minorities (Vasquez, 2007; Qureshi & Tribe, 2013).

2. Background

Globally, immigration has escalated significantly, from 82 million in 1970 to over 214 million by 2010 (Hjelm et al., 2012). Europe has experienced a particularly dramatic rise in migration, with ongoing implications for social and health systems (Qureshi & Moussaoui, 2010). Kenya hosts many immigrants fleeing political unrest in their home countries. The majority of these refugees are housed in the Kakuma and Dadaab camps. In Nairobi, it is estimated that there are 46,000 refugees and 11,000 asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2011), with a large percentage of them from Somalia, Uganda, and South Sudan. Other smaller immigrant groups include those from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Ethiopia (IOM, 2013). Consequently, the experience of being an immigrant presents distinct stressors and mental health needs that require specialized attention from mental health professionals.

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These immigrants are often underrepresented in mental health services and face challenges in forming therapeutic alliances with therapists due to several factors. Language barriers, cultural differences, and attendance inconsistency hinder migrants' access to appropriate mental health services (Lindert et al., 2008). For example, immigrants living in Nairobi may find it difficult to access mental health services due to language barriers, as Swahili and English are the primary languages spoken, and many immigrants may not be proficient in either. However, the UNHCR (2013) has encouraged the use of interpreters to bridge the language barrier, which in itself affects the alliance in some way. Culturally unaware therapists also hinder the therapeutic alliance and continuity of therapy.

3. Cultural Awareness

Njomo (2019) defines cultural awareness as understanding and respecting the diverse backgrounds of multicultural clients. It involves respecting their values and the vulnerabilities that are necessitated by immigration. While it is impossible to be conversant with all cultures, cultural awareness is crucial in multicultural counseling. With this awareness, therapists can better understand immigrant clients' behaviors, values, and attitudes. This, in turn, can enhance trust between therapist and client, increasing the likelihood of clients engaging in and remaining in therapy (Braakman, 2018). Being culturally aware happens at three levels: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional (Sue et al, 2015). Understanding the worldview of immigrant clients, their values, and practices falls under the cognitive category. The capacity for therapists to tailor-make culturally sensitive interventions in response to immigrants' issues is termed behavioral understanding. Lastly, connecting with clients at an empathic and non-judgmental level is emotional (Sue et al, 2015).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of cultural awareness in mental health care, there is limited research on the level of cultural awareness among clinical psychologists in Nairobi and its impact on the therapeutic alliance with immigrant clients. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the importance of cultural awareness in fostering therapeutic alliance between clinical psychologists and their immigrant clients in Nairobi, Kenya."

4. Clinical Psychologists' Cultural Awareness in Fostering Therapeutic Alliance

According to a study by Dune et al. (2021), the implications of cultural competence and therapeutic alliance in Australia aimed to provide evidence that enhances the country's capacity to holistically support its increasingly multicultural population through genuine acceptance and integration of diversity. It demonstrated how cultural sensitivity is achieved by recognizing the negative perceptions of ethnic, cultural, religious, social, racial, and linguistic diversity that affect client well-being. The researchers aimed to mitigate these adverse effects by leveraging the client-practitioner relationship to strengthen the therapeutic alliance.

Core beliefs can be effectively scrutinized within a strong

therapeutic alliance when topics are approached with sensitivity and respect. This process is facilitated by therapists who are not only trusted but also possess a profound awareness of their cultural backgrounds and biases. An understanding of their clients' cultural contexts and values is equally vital, as it fosters a safe environment that encourages open dialogue and meaningful exploration of these fundamental beliefs (Yon et al., 2018).

5. Clinical Psychologists' Cultural Awareness and Immigrants' Mental Health

Cultural competency training increased knowledge (Benuto et al., 2018), whereas findings for changes in attitudes, awareness, and skills were mixed. Evidence-based training guidelines and practices are needed. Given the complexities associated with culture and the ample number of variables that can be classified as cultural (i.e., immigration status, language, acculturation), developing evidence-based training guidelines is a challenging task that may require a reconsideration of how cultural competency training is approached. Because there is not sufficient information to suggest that specific curricular methods or content produce reliable outcomes, the field should reconsider the foundation of cultural competency training using psychological science as a basis.

According to (Oppedal et al., 2020), Socio-economic deprivation and exposure to traumatic experiences before migration significantly increase the risk of mental health issues among immigrants. Many individuals fleeing conflict or instability may have endured severe hardships, such as violence, the loss of loved ones, or disrupted education, leaving deep psychological scars. Upon arriving in resettlement countries, immigrants are often underrepresented in mental health services and face challenges in forming therapeutic alliances with therapists due to several factors. Language barriers, cultural differences, and attendance inconsistency hinder migrants' access to appropriate mental health services. Understanding these intricate dynamics is essential for developing effective support systems that address the specific mental health needs of immigrant populations. A study aimed at examining the construct of peer-related cultural competence, operationalized in the Youth Culture Competence Scale (YCCS), confirmed that each dimension of cultural competence uniquely correlates with depressive symptoms across the samples (Oppedal et al., 2020).

Research highlights the significance of culturally responsive approaches in mental health. According to (Lyons et al., 2025), cultural sensitivity requires commitment, self-reflection, and collaboration. Advocating collaboration, introspection, and ethical practices addresses disparities in health outcomes among diverse ethnocultural groups. This approach not only builds trust but also ensures that research findings are equitable and relevant.

6. Conclusion

This article has elucidated the significant importance of cultural awareness in cultivating a robust therapeutic alliance

between clinical psychologists and immigrant clients residing in Nairobi, Kenya. Understanding one's cultural biases and perspectives is crucial for mental health professionals, as it enables them to build a stronger rapport with clients from diverse backgrounds. Culturally informed care is essential for bridging the gap between diverse populations and mental health providers, ultimately leading to improved therapeutic outcomes.

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