

3.6: Appreciating Cultural Diversity (Multiculturalism)

Introduction

This chapter discusses how to become more culturally aware and inclusive in our work. As a human services professional, you will interact with clients who come from a myriad of backgrounds, so it is important to be knowledgeable about such differences. Physical challenges, educational backgrounds, criminal histories, as well as citizenship status, can also contribute to differences, which can make interactions between human services workers and clients more complex.

Key Words

- **Cultural Diversity/Multiculturalism:** The variety of different values, preferences, practices, and behaviors that exist between groups. Multiculturalism is an alternative, more inclusive term.
- **Ethnocentric:** A conscious or unconscious belief that one's own ethnic group or culture is inherently superior to another. An inclination toward viewing others from one's own cultural or ethnic perspective. Extreme forms include such things believing that one's own group is better than others and acting on this position, such as in the case of racism.
- **Self-Monitoring:** The process by which an individual becomes sensitive to, reflects upon, and analyzes one's own behavior and actions. Involves self-awareness, introspection, and reflection or contemplation.

Developing Cultural Sensitivity in the Internship

During the internship, you will have an opportunity to interact with clients who have different cultural backgrounds and experiences. Consequently, it is important to be able to demonstrate culturally competent and appropriately inclusive behavior when interacting with people from cultures and backgrounds different from your own. Utilizing your internship site to appreciate the types of diversity that are present in your community may help you determine what type of cultural skills you need to develop. For instance, if your site assists the Amish and Mennonite communities, you may wish to learn the differences between the two groups to better tailor your approach and services.

Of course, knowing all the nuances for every culture is impossible. However, familiarizing yourself with those cultures you are most likely to encounter is a reasonable expectation for interns, agencies, and clients to have. If the type of internship you select is like your own cultural background, you may want to consider volunteering at an agency that is more diverse.

Keep in mind that you are still in a learning process, which means it is appropriate to ask the supervisor about the suitable methods of interaction with various types of people or groups. The willingness to understand, appreciate, and experience cultural diversity will help you develop greater communication skills and cultural competency. Your internship may even be a platform for expanding your cultural awareness and ability to work with people of different perspectives and orientations. Indeed, the experience may even help you identify personal biases. Becoming aware of them is often the first step in overcoming and preventing the types of countertransference that can arise based on such things as how one sees gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and so forth.

The Reality of Cultural Differences

Cultural diversity is a much broader concept than just differences based on race or ethnicity, as it may also include equally powerful and important differences in gender, religion, and socioeconomic status. Sometimes these differences are obvious and can even be expressed by the type of clothing that is worn. At other times, the differences may be far more subtle, such as in the way conversations are held, how frequently people touch others, or how much interpersonal space they prefer.

Example:

In Western culture, patting a child on the head can simply mean “Atta boy” or “What a sweetheart,” whereas, in some tribal cultures, touching a child’s head signifies that you have a negative or even evil wish for that child.

Preparing for and gaining knowledge of cultural norms prepares you to notice important differences, increases your understanding of those you work with, and helps you to communicate more effectively. What human services worker would not want those types of skills in their work with others? Cultivating a culturally sensitive approach is vital to having a successful client-human services worker relationship and benefits both professionals as well as the clients they serve.

Developing Cultural Awareness

When experiencing cultural differences at the practicum site, you may come to have new or uncomfortable emotions. As a human services worker, one way to prepare yourself for these new experiences is to become more aware of your own cultural preferences and habits, both positive and negative ones. Knowing your cultural practices better helps you assess whether they are appropriate in a situation and better enables you to adjust, if necessary. Otherwise, you may appear naive, underprepared, insensitive, or even ignorant.

Each one of us is a partial product of our biology, gender, age, and social class. If all we had to do in life is interact with people who have the same backgrounds, there would be little need for cultural awareness, sensitivity, and competence because we would all reflect similar environments and could take them for granted. However, that is hardly ever the case in the real world. Instead, one thing all of us can do is to become aware of, and learn how to recognize, our own culturally-based perceptions, expectations, and reactions and then make appropriate adjustments when dealing with others from different backgrounds.

Learning about the various cultural differences of the people you are likely to encounter or work with will assist you as an intern. Becoming more culturally competent will also help you in your career. After all, consciously or unconsciously holding on to thoughts, ideas, jargon, or mannerisms that one's culture is superior to another will certainly be noticeable to clients. Such narrow views may create unnecessary barriers in your work that only make it harder for both parties.

Self-Awareness

In order to appreciate cultural differences, it is often necessary to enhance your own self-awareness. To be effective in the field of human services, professionals need to be aware of the dynamics of power that are associated with privileges that you may have based on your race, ethnicity, gender, age, or social class, including education and income. The first step in that process may be to recognize that historical inequality does exist in these areas. Every culture has a hierarchy of power and privilege. Awareness of your own biases, power, and preconceived ideas of various populations is essential to be an effective culturally-competent worker. By recognizing your privileges, you can begin to understand the disadvantages other cultures experience.

Example:

In Western cultures, privilege is often given to people who are heterosexual, white, young, tall, Christian, wealthy, educated, healthy, and male. Conversely, any person who does not fall into one of the favored or privileged categories may suffer some type of social, emotional, or economic disadvantage. It is also important to realize as a human services worker that even if a client does fit into a "privileged" category, it is still necessary to treat that person as an individual and not as though they are "privileged."

Activity: At this point, it might be worth reflecting on what you have experienced that could be a privilege in your life, stemming from such things as your race, ethnicity, gender, or age. What about your socioeconomic status, including that of your family, your current social class, level of education, and so on might be important to know? Do you have any privilege based on these factors? What are your feelings about these factors in relation to others, especially the client population you are working with? Remember, you also can have unconscious feelings and beliefs about these things. Knowing about them is important because they can give rise to both transference and countertransference when dealing with others. If you like, make a list of those you are likely to encounter in your internship and what you feel or believe about them, and then reflect on that list.

Personal Style

Everyone deals with cultural diversity differently. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to one's verbal and nonverbal ways of reacting and communicating. Personal style, or the way you characteristically perceive, react to, and attempt to deal with the world, is going to affect how you comport yourself in cultural situations. If you find yourself reacting or acting uncomfortably or anxiously in a situation that has strong cultural undertones and do not feel able to navigate this territory appropriately, then talking to co-workers, teachers, or a supervisor may be the best course of action. After all, they might have experience in that area and could make helpful suggestions. It may seem as though these encounters are uncomfortable at first, but the reason for doing an internship is to gain knowledge. Part of that process involves finding one's own strengths and weaknesses so that you can maximize the former and minimize the latter.

An ethnocentric individual often judges other people and groups by comparing them to the culture that the person grew up in or favors. Fortunately, this type of bias can be moderated by increasing self-awareness, avoiding stereotypes, and being open minded,

all of which help a person to step out of their cultural box and see people as individuals instead. Appreciating diversity in this way can benefit any agency, organization, or nation. Hence, it is best to try to respect and appreciate the diversity in one's immediate environment. After all, every culture is unique and has its own strengths.

It does take time and effort to gain a deeper understanding of other cultures. Yet, the more you learn about clients and their cultures, the better able you are to help them. Probably the most effective way to increase your awareness and appreciation of other cultures is through direct experience and observation. However, indirect methods help as well. For instance, reading books or articles, watching movies, viewing internet videos, listening to TED talks, and so forth are effective ways of accessing cultural information. In addition, your practicum supervisor may have some suggestions about expanding your awareness while at the site. You may find it useful researching certain cultures to avoid the uncomfortable feeling of offending someone by unintentionally saying the wrong thing or acting inappropriately.

Relating to Other Cultures

As an intern, you are likely to meet people who are different from you every day. There are many ways to react to these differences, and your ability to display a non-defensive posture, to learn about the client, and to become aware of your own reactions will need to be developed. Most human services workers will try to learn about the client population in a variety of ways to improve the quality of the services they provide. The better the intern can relate to the client, the more likely the client is to develop trust in the intern and share their concerns and problems. Continuing Education programs often help professionals learn more about how to effectively deal with cultural diversity and inclusion or multiculturalism. Once a professional relationship begins to form, some clients are willing to discuss their culture and belief systems, especially if you have expressed interest in learning about them.

Acceptance and Cultural Competence

Successful internships usually require developing some degree of skill in cultural competence. After all, one mission of human services is to empower the client, so knowing how that works in each individual's environment is important. Each discipline, from social work to law enforcement, will require its own set of skills. However, some things are important for all of them. In general, the principle of acceptance is part of a foundation for building a working relationship between the client and the human services worker. Although it is not necessary to agree with any given practice, acceptance usually involves some degree of empathy or concern. Mutual respect is also established as a result of affirming someone's individuality and recognizing the strengths of the person, including those of their cultural background. In a sense, successful human services workers embrace each person's unique contribution to humanity.

Self-Monitoring

It is important to be aware that your personal views and beliefs may have an impact on your client's life. Consequently, it behooves you to practice monitoring your own reactions while interacting with them. After all, you will probably express your own beliefs nonverbally through such things as facial expressions, speech patterns, and the like. People pay a lot of attention to nonverbal signs, so it is important to self-monitor (the process by which an individual analyzes their own behavior and actions). This activity involves self-reflection so that you can identify times when you are either helping or hurting your work. Such awareness increases your chances of responding more effectively in the future. Self-monitoring, then, is an important skill to have, and your internship is an excellent place to begin to acquire this ability or improve it.

Dealing with Mistakes

Mistakes are inevitable. However, each one is also an opportunity to learn. As a student, you are in a unique situation to take advantage of this possibility because you are under an umbrella of protections provided by your professor, supervisor, and your role of being a learner, and not a professional yet. This status allows you some room to stumble as you learn to walk, so-to-speak. Indeed, the internship may be the last time in your career you have this much room to learn without suffering serious consequences.

As an intern, if you find yourself in an awkward situation you do not know how to handle, it is not the end of the world. This status also permits you to be honest about mistakes, apologize for them if necessary, and then discuss them with your supervisor or instructor so that you can move forward by learning from the situation. Dwelling on the mistake is not going to change it, so it is helpful to focus on how it can be handled better next time.

Doing a little homework is another way to deal with being new or inexperienced. For instance, if you know that some duty or interaction is likely to be challenging for you, then it may help to prepare for it. Role-playing is often helpful because it allows you to practice alternate ways to deal with such situations and learn what feels most comfortable or compatible with your personality.

and style. A colleague or coworker may be willing to assist with this role-playing activity. It also helps to know that interns are seldom in situations where what they do can result in serious damage or harm, providing they pay attention to safety.

Typical Examples of Diverse Human Phenomena

There are many cultural, racial, and ethnic differences to appreciate in understanding human behavior – far too many to consider in any book, let alone one this size. Fortunately, your other classes should have discussed many of these issues as they affect people's perception, experience, and behavior. In addition, it is important to remember what we said about the four great “isms” that we are all prone to, consciously and unconsciously: racism, sexism, ageism, and classism. Your internship is likely to be focused on or deal with certain groups more than others. However, there are some general forms of diversity we can at least point out here. Before you read through some of the possibilities that follow, it might be a good idea to reflect on your own conscious and unconscious views and feelings about each one. That way, you may also gain some insight into your worldview.

Differing Age-Related Perspectives

Age is something we all deal with when it comes to diversity since each developmental stage involves facing its own challenges. Further, as we move through the life cycle, our perspectives change. For example, a child sees things differently than an adult and an older adult may see things differently than a younger one. These are age-related factors you may encounter in your internship, which create a diversity of perception and experience. Many internships involve working with just a portion of the life cycle, such as agencies that specialize in various age-related populations ranging from children's services through geriatric services. Other internships involve a wide range of ages. Whichever the case, this aspect of the internship becomes more complex when there is a significant gap in the age of the intern and the clientele the agency serves.

Working with Children

Agencies that provide services primarily to children, such as those in daycare or educational settings, are the most likely to have clear guidelines and rules governing internship behavior. As a group, children share more similarities than adolescents, adults, or the aged because they have not had as much time to differentiate themselves. Still, depending on how diverse the center's clientele is, there may be many differences you encounter because parenting expectations and practices reflect cultures as well as backgrounds.

Because children are a vulnerable population, you are likely to encounter such things as background checks, state rules, specific agency requirements, and close supervision in these settings. In addition, most students who intern at these sites either have experience with children or a strong interest in them. If sitting on the floor, getting down on your hands and knees, participating in spontaneous play, and dealing with rapid changes in behavior are not a part of your personal style, then this type of setting may not be for you.

Working with Adolescents

Adolescence is often a time when young adults struggle to do well in a given area or areas, and the clinician can point them in a positive direction. However, working with adolescents is sometimes said to be similar to walking a tight rope: If a professional leans too much in one direction, they risk appearing authoritarian, which may lead to a loss of trust or even rebellion by the adolescent. If the professional leans too far toward being a buddy, then they will likely lose their authority, which means they may not be taken seriously. Effectively dealing with age-related diversity requires keeping a good balance between what is needed for the client to succeed and helping that adolescent take the necessary steps they need to get there without doing it for the individual. Walking this tight rope can be difficult and exhausting at first, but like many things, ability comes with practice.

When working with adolescents, it may help to think back to your adolescent years, especially if they were challenging. For example, it might be a good idea to remember what it was like to make decisions on your own for the first time. Sometimes adolescents feel that they know what is best for them, and they perceive everyone else as stupid, especially adults – which can include you! In this case, telling someone what to do is unlikely to be helpful.

Simply asking questions to ensure that adolescents have thought things through fully might be more effective. Sometimes, of course, the decisions adolescents make are not the best choices. When that happens, be careful not to be quick to judge but instead to view this development as an opportunity to talk to them about what they have learned from the decision. When working with adolescents, it is easy to feel like your work does not matter because no one is even listening. However, it is often the case that they may be paying more attention than meets the eye through such processes as observational learning or modeling!

Working with adolescents is a skill that comes with education, practice, and field experience because, in part, different cultures expect different types of interactions with adolescents. Are you a human services worker aiding a family that expects children to be seen and not heard? Or, are you working with a family that gives children and adolescents free reign to express themselves in whatever manner they choose? In either instance, it may be helpful to realize these cultural and socioeconomic differences are active in each family or social situation. Similarly, it is important to know about and to recognize adolescent subcultures that affect your client. Learning subculture and counterculture behaviors may assist with better understanding and provide more accurate and appropriate methods of helping the client.

Working with the Elderly

There are at least two important factors related to age to keep in mind when working with older populations. One is that people become increasingly diverse in terms of their background and preferences as they age. After all, they have had more time to experience the possibilities life has to offer! Everyone has their own story that they have played an active role in creating. The other dimension to consider is that for the most part, the intern is much younger than the client in this setting. That difference creates special challenges. The greater the age gap, the more drastic the differences can be. Some cultures genuinely appreciate the elderly. In general, however, ours tends to value youth more than the aged. Like any other challenge, differences in age can be worked through. In addition, working with a population that is further along on life's timeline than you are can be viewed as an important learning opportunity. If the human services worker is considerably younger than the client, the client may have difficulty seeing the intern as credible. How could the client trust what the human services worker is telling them if that person has not lived as long and experienced what they have? Sometimes an interesting reversal occurs when an intern happens to be older than the supervisor or instructor. In either case, the general guidelines are the same: Be respectful, keep an open mind, and focus on the matter at hand. Sometimes it is helpful to acknowledge the age difference and talk about it as a way of bridging these gaps.

Differing Socioeconomic Perspectives

Socioeconomic status includes such factors as the income level and social class in which clients are raised, their educational level, their occupation (or the lack of one), etc. All these phenomena can affect an individual's perspective on the world, how they view others, their personal and social expectations, mannerisms, language, and more. For example, a client who is constantly dipping below the poverty line will have problems and face decisions that more economically-secure clients may never face. Understanding the reality of a client's life will help you to establish greater credibility and rapport. Maintaining an open mind by discarding preconceived notions you may have about people in various socioeconomic situations will help.

Of course, social interaction always goes two ways. Thus, you may want to be aware of how the client views you in terms of differences as well. For example, a struggling client may resent a human services worker who seems to be living a more "luxurious" lifestyle. Someone else might "fall between the cracks," meaning they make too much money to qualify for a program but still need help. A wealthy client may become uncomfortable about working with someone who makes much less money than they do. Right or wrong, these reactions happen all the time and will need to be addressed. These situations and many others may make it difficult for clients to open up to you.

Differing Gender Perspectives

The roles of men and women have changed over time, but there have always been distinct differences between the two. People are trained in their gender roles from birth, and gender role expectations are reinforced throughout one's life. This gender training eventually results in a personal view of masculinity or femininity and an idea of where the individual and others fit within that framework. Sometimes people develop certain ideas about what jobs men do and what jobs women do, especially those who come from a traditional background or culture. Thus, they may be surprised when they encounter people working in fields that challenge these fixed notions of gender roles.

Marital therapists often deal with differences between the communication styles of men and women. For example, men are often found to focus more on concrete issues, problem-solving, and action. Women tend to place a greater emphasis on interaction and on the emotional aspects of a situation. These differences in both verbal and nonverbal communication styles can also influence even the way men and women explain a given situation. Because of these differences, each member of a partnership may describe the same incident in an entirely different way.

Example:

When behaving similarly in identical situations, a man may be described as assertive, whereas a woman might be described as aggressive. Similarly, behavior seen as sensitive or nurturing when carried out by a woman may be perceived as weak or effeminate when carried out by a man.

Differing Religious Perspectives

The religious beliefs of a client population can vary tremendously and may range from outright fanaticism to complete atheism. This type of diversity often reflects the nature of the community an individual inhabits and ties into ethnicity as well. Many, if not most, clients rely on their religiosity to guide them through difficult times or when making important decisions. Sometimes, this dimension of their lives involves groups or community, such as a church, synagogue, or mosque. Though it is often best not to pry, human services workers should try to develop a basic understanding of a client's religious views. Not only can doing so demonstrate interest and respect, but it can also help one develop a better sense of who a person is, what their social resources are, and how they cope with problems. Ignoring one's religious beliefs may also seem offensive to some.

As a human services professional, you'll want to understand how spirituality is formed. Some people are born into a faith and are immersed in it from a young age. Others may develop a connection with a religion later in their lives. Often, people start off in a certain religious direction but later in life move away from it. Occasionally, people have conversion experiences, which are very powerful and often transformative. The bottom line, then, is that it is important to work within a client's own belief system rather than ignoring or "fighting" with it.

Example:

In some cultures, a female has little "voice," meaning that many decisions are made for her in life, often by a male figure, whether it be a husband, a father, a grandfather, or an uncle. Although acceptance does not necessarily mean agreement, not understanding or appreciating these cultural practices may make work very difficult for the human services professional and could even be destructive to the relationship.

Differences in Family Perspectives

Human services workers of all types, including interns, may encounter ways of viewing the family that are unfamiliar to them. Every family unit is unique and not all relationships within families have the same type of impact on their family structure. Someone who is married may have a very different expectation about their personal relationships than someone who is single. Divorce is becoming more prevalent today but there are also some groups and individuals who look down on it. Part of our responsibility is to become familiar with individuals and not stereotypes.

Each family is unique and can be its own "mini culture." Since family plays such a large role in forming an individual's personality, worldview, values, and behaviors, understanding a client's family of origin can help you to understand the client. The same holds true, of course, for the individual's current family situation. Therefore, knowing about the role the family plays in a person's life is important.

If, for example, a client is close with their family, they are more likely to have a strong support system behind them. Sometimes, however, the client has no family and their only support is their case worker. Frequently, the family is the source of many of the client's current problems. In small towns, even the family's reputation may be important to know about, as others often make assumptions and treat people based on that reputation, for good and for ill.

The Single "Family"

A single person is not, by definition, a "family." However, they do come from families. They often see friends as family and the "single experience" is becoming far more common as a preferred choice. Often, being single means having to deal with other people's biases about families. For example, a single person's family of origin may exert pressure on them to have a family. Friends and family often ask single people when they are going to get married. Married people all too often think that everyone wants to be married just like them. Including a single friend in group activities can make the friend feel like the odd person out. In addition, employers may "expect" more from them because they do not have a spouse, partner, or child to take care of after work. The result for the single person may be working longer hours, more evenings, on more holidays or weekends than those who are married and have families.

Single people must deal with both positive and negative perceptions. For example, people only see their freedom or think that single people are lonely, sad, or that there is something “wrong” with them for following this lifestyle. The fact of the matter is that some people just do not want to get married. In other instances, single people see marriage as a possibility but not a priority as their careers or personal interests might be more important to them.

Couples Without Children

Approximately 10 percent of married couples do not have children. About half of those cannot have them biologically. Some who want children, then, may adopt while others do not. Either way, other people may judge these couples as having a deep flaw in their biological makeup or character. However, not all individuals or couples are ready or interested in becoming parents. In fact, many couples who choose not to adopt or have children of their own are quite happy, even happier than couples who do have children because children often decrease marital satisfaction for a good number of years. In addition, times are changing, and it is becoming more common to be unmarried or even un-partnered. Some people are dedicated to their work. Others are involved in meaningful activities that tie up much of their time. Some couples are simply happy with one another and do not feel that they need anything else in their relationship. It is important to be free of pre-judgments when assessing any families. There are so many factors that influence the life decisions we make, and it is our job to be open and understanding to these varying conditions.

The Single Parent

There are also single parents who are judged in negative ways by others. It is interesting when some people see or hear about a single dad; they think that the man must be a good dad for stepping in and taking care of his child. Yet, when they see a single mom, often society looks at her very differently. The fact that moms do not get as much credit as single dads do is a problem. Sometimes they are often seen as women just wanting to get money from the government, and, at other times, single moms are pitied for having a child with a “father who does not have any involvement with the child/children.” Of course, many people also look down on “deadbeat dads,” who fail to live up to their parental responsibilities.

The fact of the matter children constitute the largest number of poor people in America and most of them live with single parents. Most single parents are younger, poorly educated or trained women. It does not take much thought to realize under these conditions that being a single parent is incredibly difficult, especially if you are among the so-called working poor who earn too much money and do not qualify for welfare or childcare benefits. Imagine how hard it would be to take care of small children, survive on a minimum wage without health care benefits, and try to better yourself all at the same time!

The Blended Family and “Nonstandard” Parents

Blended families come in all shapes and sizes. In fact, they may even become the norm soon as the nuclear family declines. Blended families include divorced and remarried parents, homes that care for foster children, as well as situations where relatives are raising another family member’s child(ren), such as grandparents parenting their grandchildren. In addition, many couples today live together without being married, but still have children. No matter how blended families are put together, they face the same challenges that other families do and often even more.

Same Sex Couples

People hold different views on same sex marriages. Some accept same-sex marriages (and parenthood), believing that you fall in love with who you fall in love with. Others believe that same sex relationships are wrong based on religious beliefs. However, it is important to realize that same sex couples may face the same interpersonal, financial, and social problems so-called “straight” couples and parents do, and sometimes even more.

Differing Gender Orientations

Sexual values and orientations are based on the personal beliefs of an individual, and one’s attitudes or feelings about sex and sexuality. People hold different beliefs about sexual values and practices based on such things as their backgrounds. No matter what one’s sexual values may be, unless they involve abuse, a human services worker should keep an open mind on the matter. It is not up to the human services worker to judge the client but to help the client to the best of the worker’s ability. If an intern is not able to separate their values from those of the client when it comes to sexual values and orientations, then they should discuss the matter with the instructor or supervisor.

Issues involving sexual orientation can be intense and emotionally driven. Sexual orientation does, however, have a great impact on an individual’s life and how they experience the world. As a society, the United States does not uniformly accept homosexuality.

Because views on homosexuality are strongly influenced by family and religion, it is difficult to alter these perceptions. Some sex researchers use the term non-heterosexual rather than homosexual because that term is more inclusive. For instance, non-heterosexual includes transgender and non-binary persons as well. Regardless of one's opinion, a human services worker must do their best to treat everyone equally. Even though same sex marriage is legal in an increasing number of countries, including the United States, there is still discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community.

Sexual identity, orientation, and behavior are sensitive topics at the personal, interpersonal, and social levels. Therefore, you may want to think about how you would respond if a client shared this kind of information with you. Reacting negatively or carelessly may irreparably damage your relationship with a client.

Geographic Perspectives

Like many countries, the United States has several regional cultures. Typically, they include New England, the South, the Midwest, and Southwest, and the West and East coasts, though it is possible to break the country into even smaller geographic regions if desired. Typically, they include historical, socioeconomic, cultural, political, and linguistic or “accent” differences. People are heavily influenced by their environments, especially their places of origin. Even when we move to a different geographical region, we often retain the values and ways of life that we are accustomed to after even becoming “acculturated” to the new region. For example, people from the North, especially New York City, usually talk, walk, and live life “faster” than those from the South, particularly the Deep South. American Indians have several geographic tribal regions, each of which has its own customs.

There are at least two good reasons to do some research on your client's geographic background. First, if you are not familiar with their customs, you may strongly offend them and damage any future relationship. Second, by becoming familiar with their customs, the human services worker will build rapport with clients, who, in turn, may become more likely to trust the worker and be more open to assistance.

Physically Challenged Perspectives

When encountering someone who is physically or mentally challenged, people often react with a sense of pity, superiority, or ignorance. Sometimes people even feel frightened or worry that something similar could happen to them and pull away from those who are challenged. The most common reaction, though, is feeling awkward and uncomfortable. It can be difficult to know how to act or what to say when you encounter clients with these challenges.

People with physical and mental challenges are often labeled. If they have a physical or mental handicap, they are sometimes seen as incompetent or even dangerous as in the case of an intellectual disability (formerly known as retardation) or schizophrenia. Seeing these possibilities instead of the individual is likely to cause unnecessary problems for the intern and the client. One of the key things to remember when you encounter someone with a physical or mental disability is that the disability is only one aspect of the person's life. Each person with a disability is a distinct individual with a unique personality and set of life circumstances.

It is also important to realize that a disability affects each client differently depending on a variety of factors, including how long the person has dealt with the disability, the severity of the disability, and the individual's personality and coping style. Keep in mind that people with physical and/or mental problems and disabilities are fully human: We all have dreams, fears, challenges, and hopes that puts us in the same boat. Though they may look or act differently, each client has their own thoughts, feelings, issues, strengths, and ideas to bring to the table, just like any other person. Sometimes the client's ideas, adjustments, and solutions may be better than yours!

Unique Circumstances

Persons with a Criminal Background

Some internship sites focus on working with people who have criminal backgrounds. In some agency settings, you may encounter clients who also have a criminal background even though your work focuses on helping them in other areas. Some clients may have committed crimes for typically criminal reasons like greed. Others may have done so in relation to a mental health problem like addiction or poverty. People who have a criminal past but have reformed oftentimes still carry the stigma and bear the prejudice of being an “ex-con.” Sometimes interns need to “get used” to these kinds of criminal backgrounds if they have never encountered them before. Still, all human services workers must still see these individuals for who, not what, they are if they come to you for help.

It may help to remember that prison is not a nice place. Sometimes crimes are committed there as well, which means that your client may have suffered in some terrible ways, such as being raped, but did not report it. Regardless, trauma is trauma and will have deleterious effects on whomever suffers it. For the most part, clients with criminal records need to be treated as just another person who needs assistance, unless, of course, they pose a risk to one's safety.

Example:

An intern is working at a place such as Job and Family Services. The intern feels that since they follow the law, it is unfair to get an ex-con a job while there are people on the caseload with no criminal records who need the same help. In this case, the intern may need to examine their values and look for the possibility of countertransference, especially if the intern happened to be a victim of a crime. After all, someone with a criminal background who is trying to reform means fewer tax dollars spent on crime, and more tax revenues, which benefit society overall. In addition, many recovering addicts have a criminal past, and helping them become fully engaged citizens brings similar benefits.

Undocumented Persons

Undocumented persons create a unique situation for some interns. If one comes across a client who is an undocumented person, the clinician should first make sure he or she is familiar with the agency's policies on that matter. If there is no policy, the clinician should then talk to the supervisor as to what to do about the situation. Remember, there are some legal and ethical issues associated with this area of human services work, such as the risk of deportation if authorities find the client is here illegally.

Be sure to consider your own views on these matters and do some research on the issues as some beliefs are not supported by facts. For example, sometimes people think that those who illegally enter this country are here to steal jobs or commit violent crimes. However, it turns out that most of the jobs that undocumented persons take are difficult, undesirable, and pay low wages, even below minimum wage. Moreover, illegal immigrants have a lower incidence of violent crime than legal citizens since they have much to lose if they become involved in the criminal justice system.

Challenges Along the Way

Scenario: A young man, around 25-years-old, comes into the agency. He happens to be an immigrant from Iraq. The intern had a family member die in the 9/11 attacks and has strong anti-Muslim feelings. In this case, the intern should probably reflect on the situation. If they realize that their personal issues may have a negative impact on the work, then the individual should talk with the supervisor about the possibility of countertransference and how to handle it.

Tools for Chapter 6

No matter what the person's life story may include, clients come from all sorts of perspectives and backgrounds. They come to see a professional because they need help, not to deal with someone else's biases. Having a strong sense of self-awareness is one way to make sure one provides equal service to culturally diverse clients. Take some time to reflect more on your own thoughts and beliefs about cultural diversity. It may be helpful to write down your self-reflections and even to compare them with those of a colleague or a friend. However, it is important to remember that no one likes to admit biases or prejudices. Though honesty is essential for self-awareness, it also helps to find someone who you trust to discuss sensitive issues.

Activity 1: What Would You Do?

Today you are meeting a new client, and your job, according to your supervisor, is to help the man get a job. As you read over the file and all the information about the individual, you wonder why a man in his mid-thirties has had only two low-paying jobs before. Then you learn that the client has three criminal charges for a non-violent crime. As you talk to the client, you learn that he is a recovering addict and committed these crimes to support his drug habit. There are four courses of action you can take:

- Tell your supervisor you refuse to take this case for "personal reasons."
- Figure out how to get this man a job, so you can tell your boss this case is completed.
- Push this file to the back burner until you find a more deserving client a job first.
- Tell the client he is on his own and check in on his progress from week to week.

What would you do? Why? Discuss your thoughts on all the options with your classmates. What would you do if the individual was convicted of a violent crime such as robbery, assault, or domestic violence?

Activity 2: Self-Reflections

Go back through the various areas of diversity and identify which ones apply to you or your internship. Then reflect on your own views as well as reactions to them. It might be helpful to do this activity with a friend or in a supervised small group situation like your internship classroom.

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