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Cultural Variations in Psychopathology

From Research to Practice

Sven Barnow
Nazli Balkir
(Editors)
Foreword

Culture is an integral part of individual development and functioning. The impact that culture has on individuals may be acute or insidious. As the world becomes a global village as a result of globalization, it is inevitable that movement of resources, including people, will become more frequent.

We know that culture influences the way we express emotional distress, how abnormality is defined, how help is offered and from where therapeutic intervention is sought. Culture dictates expressions of illness as well as our understanding. The debate between cultural universalism and relativism is critical in psychiatry. As our patients migrate, mental health professionals move around as well. Therefore, the need to attempt to understand how cultures define and explain distress becomes urgent.

This book, emerging as a result of a closed workshop in Heidelberg, is a welcome addition to the ever-expanding field of our understanding of cultural variations. The reader will find stimulating topics that deserve further discussion and debate as we continue to strive towards providing better clinical care to our patients, irrespective of their ethnicities and cultures.

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Preface & Acknowledgments

This book is based on an international closed workshop on “Cultural Variations in Emotion Regulation and the Treatment of Psychiatric Patients” organized by the research team of the Institute of Psychology at Heidelberg University, Germany, December 16–17, 2010. The workshop was organized in conjunction with and supported by grants from the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context,” of the Karl Jaspers Center for Advanced Transcultural Studies at the University of Heidelberg. Many of our colleagues assisted in the organization of the workshop and it is quite impossible to list all the people who contributed to the success of this effort. Our appreciation goes to the entire academic and nonacademic staff of the Institute of Psychology and of the Karl Jaspers Center for their help and support. Special thanks go to our colleague Elizabeth A. Arens, also the author of one of the chapters in this book, who gave her valuable assistance both for the organization of this workshop and for the editing process of the current book.

The aim of the workshop was to bring together a variety of distinguished academics and practitioners working with patients from ethnically diverse minority populations to exchange perspectives and methods for research and practice. We are grateful to all those who participated in the workshop and wish to thank them all for stimulating discussions. Our special appreciation goes to the contributors of this book, for devoting their valuable time to revising their papers for publication. The chapters included in the present book cover a wide range of subjects relating to cultural psychology – from basic issues to clinical matters from an interdisciplinary perspective. We genuinely hope that this volume will help researchers and mental health professionals working with ethnically diverse (migrant) communities in Europe and throughout the world to conduct relevant research and advance culturally sensitive practice in mental health care.

Sven Barnow & Nazli Balkir
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I. Introduction

The Relevance of Culture for Mental Health and Illness
Introduction

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In the era of globalization there is a significant increase in population movements and contacts between societies and cultures. Presently, more people are moving further and faster than ever before. Historically, the number of immigrants in the world has more than doubled since 1975, with most immigrants living in Europe (56 million), Asia (50 million), and Northern America (41 million). The increasing inflow of immigrants has led Europe to become a growing pluralistic society. Each year, an average of 1.8 million people who are in search of work or are asylum seekers immigrate to Europe permanently (Lindert, Schouler-Ocak, Heinz, & Priebe, 2008). Migration is known to have significant effects on mental health. It is well established that immigration and its related acculturation stress are associated with higher risk for mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression (e.g., Bhugra, 2003). The increased diversity of service users for mental health constitutes a substantial challenge to service providers not only in EU countries but also in other developed countries receiving international immigrants. People from different ethno-cultural backgrounds often have different perceptions and comprehension of mental health and illness and are habituated to different modes of mental health care as well. This often results in a detrimental discrepancy between the needs and expectations of patients and the service providers, which attenuate the effectiveness of treatment and lead to unexplained high drop-out rates (White & Marsella, 1982). In support of this argument, it has been well demonstrated that the members of ethnic minority groups exhibit higher rates of drop out and lower rates of compliance to treatment compared to the native population (Haasen, Lambert, Yagdiran, & Krausz, 1997).

In response to these problems, one of the central contributions that mental health professionals can make to this process is the continued provision of culture sensitive, high-quality, evidence-based mental health care. A major solution to enhance the quality of the mental health care is the advancement of research on all aspects of the interplay between culture and mental health, including epidemiology, assessment, diagnosis, course, outcome treatment, and prevention of psychopathology as well as appropriateness of the workforce and health services (see Figure 0.1). Although the ethical, social, and political importance of considering cultural diversity in mental health care is formally acknowledged, cultural psychology is still in its infancy and is not yet officially considered as an approach by the majority of the institutions and providers of mental health care in most of the developed countries (Kirmayer, Rousseau, Corin, & Groleau, 2008). Correspondingly, compared to the other fields of mental health, the quantity and
In response to this limited research, with 16 chapters arranged into five sections, the objective of this book is to illuminate and understand the interplay between migration, culture, and psychopathology as well as its implications for service delivery in mental health care. We are of the opinion that an enhanced appreciation of the impact of socio-cultural factors on mental health will serve both to deepen the understanding of cultural diversity and to enhance the quality and acceptability of the mental health care provided to all. To this aim, we begin with the examination of repercussions of migration on mental health. In the first section, chapter 1 (Schouler-Ocak) provides an introductory overview of recent trends in immigration to Europe and a brief examination of epidemiology of common mental disorders prevalent among immigrants (e.g., suicidality, psychosis, affective and addictive disorders, and dementia) and thus facilitate the identification of risk and protective factors.

Subsequently, in order to obtain a better understanding of the interplay between culture and psychopathology, we provide a preliminary section that sheds light on the ways

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**Figure 0.1. Areas of research in mental health care required for improving the quality of care provided to ethnic minority clientele.**
that culture shapes our brain. In chapter 2, Han provides fascinating data showing that neural substrates underlying self-related processing differ between Western and East Asian cultures. In chapter 3, Northoff and Panksepp explain how the self is related to emotion regulation and he presents data revealing that self-rated processing is related to activity in subcortical and cortical regions. Further, based on an evolutionary viewpoint he argues that self-related processing is present in different animals in different degrees. These findings can help us to understand how culture shapes self-rated processing in the brain.

Coming from this basic neurobiological research, our next focus is on the ways in which culture influences the development, course, and outcome of psychopathology. Given that emotion regulation is a transdiagnostic approach to the etiology and maintenance of psychopathology (Fairholme, Boisseau, Ellard, Ehrenreich, & Barlow, 2009), the third section starts with how cultural factors and socialization affects emotion regulation strategies, and how these strategies are associated with psychopathology. Accordingly, chapter 4 (Trommsdorff and Heikamp) discusses universal and culture-specific aspects of socialization of emotion regulation by providing some cross-cultural studies on the function of parental support, control, and sensitivity for emotion development and regulation. The authors argue that cultural models of self-other relations are transmitted through beliefs and culture-based practices, which in turn have an impact on emotion regulation. The main message from her work is that studying cultural context is important for the understanding of how emotion regulation relates to social competence and mental health.

Chapter 5 (Butler) completes the picture of the association between culture and emotion regulation by illustrating the ways in which cultural contexts modulate emotion regulatory processes and how this is related to mental health. Butler emphasizes that emotion regulation can be conceptualized in different ways. One is that the regulation of emotions is not constrained within a person; instead it is embedded in a larger cultural context. Thus, culture influences many aspects of emotional responding, which is often neglected in studies.

Chapter 6 (Arens) covers a recent study on how culture moderates the relationship between emotion regulation and mental health in the presence of psychopathology. The author asks whether or not cultural differences end where psychopathology begins. In her study she shows that healthy Turkish women less often use emotion regulation strategies such as reappraisal, but suppress their emotions more often in comparison to a healthy German control group. However, if one considers depressive patients these cultural differences disappear. These findings may indicate that although cultural differences in emotion regulation strategies exist, they are not dependent on psychopathology.

In section four, there are several chapters focusing on the cultural variations in the clinical course and manifestation of mental disorders and its implications for diagnosis and clinical assessment. For example, chapter 7 (Mezzich) aims to provide conceptual rationales for the inclusion of cultural factors in psychiatric diagnosis (i.e., cultural formulation approach) and suggestions for the content and use of this approach. Chapters 8 through 13 review the results of several studies of incidence and prevalence, patterns
of clinical course, and outcome of common mental disorders prevalent among minority population. Readers are encouraged to understand the social world within mental illness and to realize the limitations of traditional constructions of illness.

The final point of consideration of this book is to shed more light on the ways in which the knowledge about the implications of cultural diversity is transferred into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes to eliminate ethnic disparities in mental health care. Therefore, cultural competence at individual (e.g., professionals) and systems level (mental health care organizations) was the focus of section five. In the first instance, chapter 14 (Balkir) reviews the sociocultural construction of mental illness and help-seeking behavior, in order to inform the professionals concerning the mental health care needs of ethnic minority clientele and therefore provide practical solutions for their differential service utilization. Here, we illustrate that culture is one of the major determinants of recognition of symptoms and consequently the interpretation, conceptualization, and reaction to distress, all of which determine the choice of and adherence to treatment.

Furthermore, chapter 15 (Qureshi and Eiroa Orosa) introduces cultural competence theory and practices that have the capacity to increase the mental health care professionals’ proficiency in serving ethnic minority clients. This chapter presents an interpretive-relational approach to cultural competence conceptualized as a process of self-introspection rather than knowledge gathering. The final chapter (Machleidt et al.) deals with the ways in which the definition of cultural competence has been adopted by mental health care systems. By exemplifying Sonnenberg Guidelines for psychiatric-psychotherapeutic management of immigrants in Germany, the authors provide practical solutions for translating such guidelines into hands-on strategies that would renovate mental health services to make them more effective for ethnic minority populations.

To summarize, this book examines the current state of the art by exploring the broad scope of cultural psychology. It is our hope that readers’ understanding of the multiple ways in which culture and human behavior can be intertwined will be enriched. We believe that an enhanced comprehension of the interplay between culture and mental health will strengthen the quality of every phase of mental health care continuum – from research to clinical practice.

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