

Teaching Trauma Psychology: Cultural Challenges

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“Too Much Culture”

- Question: “Was multicultural material relevant to the course included in an integrated manner?”

“Yes, however I thought that we almost spent too much time talking about racial/cultural issues...so we did not get through all the RELEVANT material”

(student’s answer in the instructor’s evaluation form-PTSD seminar)

Is Culture *Relevant* in Trauma Psychology Courses?

“Culture influences symptoms, course and outcome of PTSD, determines clinical presentation of problems and help-seeking behavior... Culture shapes the ways individuals, family, and larger systems cope with, and adapt to consequences of trauma. It determines understanding and conceptualizing of suffering”

(Droždek, 2007)

Trauma and Culture: State of the Field

- Trauma is a very recent field (example: newly created Div.56). Culture is still not part of the majority of trauma treatment paradigms

“I have yet to find a major model of trauma treatment that begins with the question, “What does this trauma means to this person, given their history, their cultures, and their identities?”

(Brown, 2007, p. 80)

- PsychINFO search results from 1988-2009 (“Trauma”, “PTSD”, and “culture”) only yielded 161 articles. Many of these articles were from edited books by cultural anthropologists/psychiatrists and foreign journals
“Trauma”, “PTSD” and “Race”: 60 articles

Culture and Trauma-Facts

- Membership diversity in Trauma Division and ISTSS
- Patients in clinical trials to support evidence-based practices are not representative of patients in the community. That is particularly true for ethnic minority and immigrant groups (Westen, 2006).
- Ethnic minority populations have been neglected by evidence-based practices. (Sue & Zane, 2006).
- Practice-guidelines (ISTSS, 2000) for those working with trauma are not based on research conducted on diverse populations.

Trauma Psychology Courses

- Very few Graduate and Undergraduate programs in the US teach Trauma Psychology as a required course (source: Trauma Psychology Division 56)
- Trauma Psychology Curricula and Globalization
- The field of Traumatology tends to view trauma as a universal phenomenon (very few cultural considerations)
- Our understanding of trauma is heavily influenced by the biomedical model

Teaching Trauma: Theoretical and Research Challenges

- Culture is seen as a barrier for clean-cut evidence-based research (an exotic and irrelevant nuisance)
- Cultural translations of the evidence provided in research studies
- How to define “trauma”
- How do people cope with trauma?

Trauma Definition: A Multidisciplinary Approach

“A Comprehensive understanding of trauma,...must explore how collective cultural meanings articulate with the individual psychological and biological responses identified through neuroscience and clinical research.”

(Kirmayer et al., 2007)

Opportunities and Challenges: Incorporating Culture in Trauma Courses

- Infuse cultural training and cultural awareness in trauma courses
- Knowledge of the impact of values and beliefs on help-seeking behavior, development, and psychopathology
- Knowledge of culture-specific healing interventions/techniques
- Ability to use “scientific mindedness” (Sue)

Incorporating Culture in Trauma Psychology: Systemic Changes

Establish benchmarks to assess cultural competence in trauma psychology at the undergraduate/graduate level

Diverse representation in accreditation commissions, state and national psychological associations and trauma-focused institutions

Ensuring an ethnographic training in graduate school programs

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Ensure a diverse representation of psychologists on editorial boards

Create standards of cultural competence in Trauma Psychology texts

Expand scientific research and training paradigms

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Promote international/interdisciplinary
collaborations

Examination of socio-cultural/political factors
involved in recovery from trauma