Cultural differences between the helper and client can be a major barrier in building rapport in the counseling relationship. Before change can occur, rapport is often a necessary prerequisite (Corey, 2000). A lack of rapport can increase the chance that clients in the criminal justice system will miss scheduled appointments, not follow through on referrals, violate parole/probation, engage in criminal thinking or addictive behavior again, and wind up back in the system.

Racial and cultural tension that exists in the larger society can also be present in the counseling relationship (Sue & Sue, 1990). This tension can be further exacerbated as disparities in prison sentences based on race (Robinson, 2002) may make many clients not trust the counseling relationship. They may view you, the parole, probation, or corrections officer as “a part of the system.” Still, more tension and mistrust can exist if the worker and client are both from different cultural groups. This article describes seven strategies that effective cross-cultural counselors can use in building rapport with clients in the criminal justice system.

The Effective Cross-Cultural Counselor:

1) Has an awareness of his or her personal biases, assumptions, and stereotypes and strives not to allow them to interfere with the work.

2) Takes time to increase credibility in the cross-cultural counseling relationship. Clients often look at more than academic degrees to assess if their helpers are credible (Sue & Sue, 1990). Examples of counselor credibility, aside from academic degrees include:
a) Sincerity – Since it is difficult to have complete knowledge of another culture, it is possible for a counselor to inadvertently insult clients by “saying the wrong thing.” Helper sincerity is the one thing that allows clients to forgive helpers who violate a cultural boundary.

b) Service energy – When helpers put out a minimal amount of energy, clients often feel that it has something to do with ethnic differences. High service energy increases helper credibility by sending a message to clients that they are valued. This is particularly important in the criminal justice system, as high service energy can lead clients to believe that the helper is in their corner, rather than being “a part of the system.”

c) Knowledge of the client’s culture – Credibility increases as helpers acquire knowledge of the client’s culture. This knowledge is not gained to “impress the client”; it is gained to increase empathy in the cross-cultural counseling relationship. Four sources of knowledge include: books; seminars; personal exposure to the cultural group; and consultants. If the client speaks English as a second language, for example, it is often helpful for helpers to learn key words and phrases from the client’s original language. This can be instrumental in helping to build rapport. Just as some clients learn to speak English as a second language, a great equalizer is the client witnessing the helper’s struggle to learn
the client’s first language.

d) A nonjudgmental attitude – In focus group interviews, Sanders asked African American female clients what they found undesirable in helping professionals. Their number one response was “a discomfort with helpers who judge their romantic relationships.” In focus groups with helping professionals who work with African American female clients, participants revealed that they find it extremely difficult to avoid judging the relationship patterns of African American women (Sanders, 2001). A nonjudgmental attitude increases counselor credibility.

e) Counselor resourcefulness – Helping clients with needed resources early in the counseling relationship often facilitates the building of rapport and facilitates counselor credibility in the cross-cultural counseling relationship (Sue & Sue, 1990).

3) Has a sensitive discussion of race and other differences. Race and other differences between the helper and client can often be barriers to trust in the cross-cultural counseling relationship (Sanders, 1993). Clients rarely state directly to their workers that they are having difficulty working with them because of cultural differences. They often send the message indirectly by talking about past personal experiences (often negative) that they’ve had with members of the helper’s cultural group. This is often a good time for the helper to explore what it is like for the client to be working with him/her as a corrections professional.
Example

Client #1 (African American): “I have had a very difficult time working with my supervisor at work who is white. White police officers often follow me in my neighborhood.”

Probation officer’s response: “You have been talking about your experiences with whites. What is it like to be working with me, a probation officer who is white?”

Client #2 (Mexican American): “Blacks and Mexicans are always fighting in my neighborhood. My son recently got into a fight with a Black kid.”

Probation officer’s response: “You sound distraught. On a number of occasions you have mentioned painful interactions that you have had with Blacks. What is it like for you to meet with me, a Black probation officer?”

In most instances the client will chuckle, laugh uncomfortably, or respond, “I have no problem working with you.” While his/her answer may appear vague or avoidant, the interaction almost always increases rapport between the helper and client, because the client feels that if a corrections officer is willing to explore issues of race and other differences, he/she must really want to make a connection.

4) Has an awareness of current and historical tensions that exist between the client and the counselor’s culture and the ability to talk openly about the tension if it is a barrier to trust.

5) Allows the client to be the teacher about his/her cultural experience. This establishes an egalitarian relationship. Counselors will do a
better job of establishing rapport if they take a “curious” rather
than “all knowing” posture about the client’s culture.

5) Avoids lumping all clients from the same ethnic group into one category.
There are religious, socioeconomic, geographical/educational differences
that exist among individuals from the same ethnic group (Sue & Sue, 1990).
For instance, there are numerous cultural differences between poor
Appalachian white clients and wealthy white clients who live in Beverly Hills,
California. From a clinical perspective, it would be wise to approach a youth
from Chicago who is on probation for the distribution of marijuana
differently than you would a Jamaican youth from Brooklyn who says he
smokes marijuana as a part of Rastafarian culture.

7) Incorporates aspects of the client’s culture into the change process.
Cohyis & White (2002) outline a 250-year history of various tribes
successfully incorporating aspects of Native American culture into addictions
treatment. The Nation of Islam has been able to reach African American
males in the criminal justice system, who have been difficult to reach in
traditional counseling. Their approach involves instillation of hope, teaching
cultural pride, self-love, and empowerment (Sanders, in press)

Incorporating aspects of a client’s culture into the change process does not
necessarily involve a complete overhaul of a program. There are subtle steps that
corrections officers can take to assure that culture is taken into consideration. These
steps include:

A) Asking clients how they view the problems and their views of
the solutions to the problems from their cultural perspectives.

B) Never viewing clients in isolation, particularly if they come from cultures that traditionally view the extended family as the primary unit (Sue & Sue, 1990). Some of these groups include Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans. Mentioning the client’s family during sessions and inviting them into sessions might be quite helpful.

C) Referring clients to culturally sensitive service providers.

D) Recommending to clients that they embrace the healthiest aspects of their cultures as a part of their recovery.

E) Asking bilingual clients if they prefer to attend self-help groups in which English or their native language is spoken.

F) Encouraging clients to read books, particularly biographies that tell stories of the trials and triumphs of members of their cultural group. This can be inspiring.

Bridges Instead of Walls

Cultural differences can create barriers to change when working with clients in the criminal justice system. This article was written to help you build therapeutic walls instead of bridges in your work.
About the Author

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