Dimensions of culture

The concept of 'culture' refers to a topic – the way people live their lives – that is highly complex. In addition, the concept of culture has been used and understood in different ways in different contexts – for example the difference between everyday culture as represented through Netflix and Instagram, and the high culture associated with the work of iconic figures such as Beethoven and Shakespeare.

As a therapist, cultural sensitivity, responsiveness and humility requires an awareness of how aspects of cultural identity and belonging might be expressed in a client's actions and way of being – and also in your own actions and way of being. The following themes describe some of the implicit and explicit ways that cultural identity can be exhibited.

Worldview/ontology

People in different cultures possess different ideas about the fundamental nature of reality. In Western cultures, people generally hold a *dualistic* view of reality, dividing up the world into two types of entity: mind and body. The mind consists of ideas, concepts, and thought. The physical world, on the other hand, is tangible, observable, and extended in space. By contrast, in many other cultures, people do not have a dualist conception of the nature of reality, but instead experience the world as a wholeness, as a unity. The philosophical systems associated with Buddhism, Hinduism, and other world religions all adopt this position, in which the physical, the mental, and the spiritual are understood as aspects or facets of a single unified reality, rather than as separate domains of being. The client's understanding of reality cuts through everything that happens in therapy. For example, a dualistic Western culture has generated many terms and concepts that refer solely to mentalistic phenomena: depression, anxiety, guilt. These terms do not exist in cultures where there is a more holistic view of reality. In these cultures, the person's response to a difficult life situation may be expressed in physical terms, or with reference to spiritual entities. In Western dualist cultures, it makes sense merely to talk about problems, to engage in a 'talking cure'. In cultures built around a sense of the unity and inter-relatedness of mind, body, and spirit, healing practices will engage the person at all these levels, encompassing activities such as rituals, meditation, exercise, and diet.

Origin myth

Any member of a culture or sub-culture will be able to tell the story of how the group or community came into being, and how it evolved from that point to the present time. This story is at the same time a historical account of actual events, and a mythic or symbolic narrative that conveys a sense of the values of that cultural group. Visitors to the culture, or new members, generally have access to a simplified version of the story, while the elders of the group are able to tell the whole story. When a member of a particular culture talks, the origin myth or narrative is always implicit in what they are saying.

Sense of self

Counselling and psychotherapy have primarily developed within European and North American cultures that espouse an understanding of the person as being an autonomous, separate individual, with strong boundaries and an 'inner', private region of experience. This notion can be contrasted with the experience of self found in indigenous, traditional, non-Western, sociocentric and collectivist cultures: the 'self' in these cultures is not an entity that exists independently from the relationships and contexts in which it is interpreted. On the contrary, a person's sense of self depends for its existence on a network of relationships. The person in a collectivist community is likely to regard themselves as a member of a family, clan, or other social group, and to make decisions in the light of the needs, values, and priorities of this social network.

Moral rules and values

Making moral choices, deciding between right and wrong, is central to life. However, the moral landscape is constructed quite differently in different cultures. The key characteristics of modern Western morality are a belief in individual choice and responsibility, and a willingness to be guided by abstract moral principles such as 'fairness' or 'honesty'. By contrast, in traditional cultures, moral issues are much more likely to be decided through consideration of the operation of *fate* (e.g. the Hindu notion of *karma),* and moral teachings or principles are embedded in stories rather than articulated through abstract concepts. Another dimension of cultural contrast can be found in the area of *moral values.* Individualist cultures tend to promote values such as achievement, autonomy, independence, and rationality. Collectivist cultures place more importance on sociability, sacrifice, and conformity.

The concept of time

In modern societies, time is treated as a linear constant, segmentable into units such as seconds, minutes, and hours. A defining characteristic of such societies is the extent to which they are future-oriented. The past is forgotten, destroyed, built over – packaged, and sold as 'heritage'. Traditional, collectivist societies, by contrast, are predominantly past-oriented and time is regarded as circular rather than linear. There is a strong continuity in the oral history that is shared through storytelling and ritual in traditional cultures. It is normal to imagine that ancestors are in some sense present and can communicate with the living. In modern cultures, the notion of progress is given a great deal of value. In traditional cultures, progress and development can often be perceived as threatening. The forms of communication and storage of information, and types of work tasks, in different cultural settings also have an impact on the experience of time.

The significance of place

The strong bond between person and place, characteristic of non-industrialised and rural societies, has been largely severed in modern urban societies. Social and geographical mobility is commonplace. People move around in response to educational and work opportunities. Transport and relocation are relatively easy. As a result, there are few people who live as adults in the same neighbourhood or community in which they grew up, and even fewer who live in the neighbourhoods or communities where their parents or grandparents grew up. While modern cultures retain some appreciation of place, this tends to be from a detached, observer perspective, such as in the form of transferable ownership and tourism. By

contrast, in indigenous and traditional cultures, people belong to the land rather than the land belonging to the people.

Externally observable dimensions of cultural identity

Turning now to more immediately observable and overt aspects of culture, a significant aspect of cultural difference that has received substantial attention is non-verbal behaviour: cultures can be differentiated in terms of the way that people employ non-verbal cues such as touch, eye contact, gesture, and proximity. For example, direct eye contact is considered in Western cultures as a sign of honesty and openness, but in many other cultures would be perceived as rude or intrusive. Similarly, each culture employs complex unwritten rules about who can be touched and in what circumstances. Important cultural differences can also be observed in how people use language. People from different cultures have quite distinct modes of storytelling. Western individuals tend to tell well-ordered, logical, linear stories. People from more orally based traditional cultural groups tend to tell stories that are circular and never seem to get to the 'point'. Social anthropologists have paid a great deal of attention is *kinship patterns*: What is the size and composition of the family group? How are marriages arranged? Who looks after children? How is property passed on from one generation to another? From the point of view of a counsellor or psychotherapist, the answers a person gives to these questions help to generate a picture of the kind of relational world in which they expect to live, or which is regarded as normal. A powerful way of illustrating differences in kinship ties is to ask: what is your most important relationship? In Western cultures, the answer will often be that the most important relationship is with the spouse or life partner. In other parts of the world, the closest relationship is between parent and child. Kinship involves care – each culture has its own patterns of care, for children older people, and those who are sick, disabled or indigent. Linked to kinship structures are patterns of gender relationships and authority relationships. Cultures have varying understandings of which emotions are acceptable and are allowed expression in public. One of the ways that the 'emotional rules' of a culture can be observed is through the words, images and metaphors that a person has available to describe emotions and feelings. Woven through all of these cultural practices is art-making – all cultures, from the earlies cave paintings, have used art, music and dance to fulfil a range of functions. A further observable manifestation of cultural difference consists of attitudes and practices around healing. Every culture has its own understanding of well-being, illness, and cure. The theory of healing espoused by members of a culture can be based on scientific knowledge, as in Western industrial societies, or can be grounded in supernatural beliefs or indigenous knowledge about medicinal plants.

Further reading:

The themes above are typical of the ideas and ways of making sense of culture that have been developed within the field of cultural and social anthropology. Further explanation and elaboration of these perspectives can be found in introductory texts with that discipline, such as:

Engelke, M. (2017). *Think Like an Anthropologist*. Pelican.

Pountney, L. and Marić, T. (2021). *Introducing Anthropology: What Makes Us Human?* 2nd edn. Polity.

Weisgrau, M., Rosman, A., & Rubel, P. G. (2023). *The tapestry of culture: An introduction to cultural anthropology*. Rowman & Littlefield.

The Hofstede model of cultural difference

An alternative approach to understanding culture that has been highly influential within fields such as management, health, education and social care, has been a perspective developed by the Dutch social scientist Geert Hofstede, based on a model of 6 key dimensions that capture the main points of similarity and difference between national cultures: power difference, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence.

Further information about the Hofstede model can be found at:

https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hofstede%27s_cultural_dimensions_theory