

Culturally Appropriate Counseling and Human Services in Appalachia: The Need and How to Address It.

Heather J. Ambrose, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Counseling and Human Services
Director of Clinical Experience
Lindsey Wilson College
Columbia, Kentucky
ambroseh@lindsey.edu

Roger D. Hicks, M.Ed.

Magoffin County Protection and Permanency
Salyersville, Kentucky
Rogerd.hicks@mail.state.ky.us

Appalachia is a region of the country that has been frequently misunderstood and ridiculed by outsiders. The people of Appalachia possess a strong work ethic and a rich cultural heritage consisting of many values and traditions seldom understood by outsiders. Often referred to as mountain people, Appalachians have a strong sense of family and community. This dedication to family and being at home in the mountains has played a large role in keeping the Appalachian people and culture fairly isolated from the rest of the United States. However, the problems that plague the rest of the country are now beginning to creep into the Appalachian region. Problems with drugs, extreme poverty, and domestic violence are now creating an increased need for mental health and other social service programs in Appalachia. As more mental health services and service providers have moved into Appalachia, it has become imperative that counselors be familiar with how to work effectively with this oppressed minority group. While there has been some literature written about providing mental health services to members of most minority groups, there is virtually no literature concerning counseling issues related to working with Appalachian clients.

The region of Appalachia consists of approximately 22 million people living in 406 counties. 42% of these counties are rural as opposed to 20% nationally (Raitz and Ulack, 1984). The people of Appalachia have a varied cultural and ethnic heritage. This heritage includes Scotch, Irish, English, Huguenot, Native American, Melungeon, African American and other Europeans (Caudill, 1962). Influences from these varied cultures have contributed to the development of many distinct cultural traits belonging to the Appalachian people. Appalachia is known in part for its influence on music. English folk songs sprang up out of the mountains of Appalachia along with the roots of Bluegrass music (Smith, 2000.). Language is also an important cultural trait of Appalachia. Aside from there being many distinct regional dialects in spoken English in Appalachia, much of the language still resembles Elizabethan English (Arnow, 1996). Arts and Crafts have been a large part of the Appalachian culture as well. Appalachia has been known for producing some of the most extraordinarily beautiful handmade quilts. Mountain people have also been known for their wood working crafts that have produced such items as dulcimers and folk toys including fox and chicken and gee-haw whimmy diddles (Still, 1975, Arnow, 1996). As one can see, the cultural heritage of Appalachian people is rich and has much to offer those on the outside. However, according to Slone (1979) "So many lies and half-truths have been written about us, the mountain people, that we are made to feel ashamed when we really have something to be proud of." This pride of the mountain people and the misguided assumptions of those not familiar with the Appalachian culture is what drives the need to educate others about the unique challenges associated with working with Appalachian clients within a mental health setting.

According to Lee (1999), being a culturally skilled counselor involves being aware of issues that influence psychological processes including one's own cultural background, experiences and attitudes, values, and biases. Lee also states that part of being a culturally skilled counselor includes specific knowledge and information about the particular group one is working with. Jones (1994) discusses ten unique cultural values of Appalachian people, (Religion; Independence, Self-reliance, and Pride; Neighborliness; Familism; Personalism; Humility and Modesty; Love of Place; Patriotism; Sense of Beauty; and Sense of Humor) as being key to understanding those people. He also states that "all work in Appalachia must be based on the genuine needs as expressed by mountain people themselves. Whatever work is done must be done with the recognition that Appalachian culture is real and functioning" (p. 9-10). Key values from that group listed by Jones and the above quoted statement, along with selected appropriate work in the field of counseling are the foundation on which this paper is based. The work of

Jones is germane because no counselor can expect to build an effective relationship with a client with whom a cultural deficit exists.

Building a Relationship with an Appalachian Client:

Appalachian counselors and clients are a unique group in that their minority status is defined more by geography than race or other characteristics. Kimbrough (1995), in his research on Appalachian Culture states that because he is an Appalachian and speaks with a suitable “hillbilly” accent he is able to understand the Appalachian jargon, whereas outsiders often have difficulties understanding the mountain language. Even though Kimbrough sees himself as being Appalachian, he used an ethnic epithet in his description of working with Appalachian people. His use of the word “hillbilly”, while it may be socially acceptable, is clearly a sign of disrespect to his research subjects. Lee (1999) states that: “Clients who become aware that they have been subjected to racial discrimination, sexual harassment, or cultural racism in other forms may seek assistance from a counselor. Discrimination has many effects on individuals. The client may experience feelings of helplessness or anger.” (p. 19). In order to address these feelings of Appalachian clients, the counselor must work to develop a culturally appropriate approach to counseling.

When building a relationship with a client from Appalachia it is essential to remember the importance of modesty and humility. As Jones (1994) states, mountain people are “levelers” and believe they are as good as anybody else, but they also believe they are not better than anybody else. Mountain people believe they should not put on airs, they should not boast, nor try to get above their raising. This is important for counselors who are not from the Appalachian culture to remember. If a non-Appalachian counselor approaches an Appalachian client as if he/she is an expert and therefore better than the client, the client will automatically become distrustful of the counselor. The client will also be less likely to return to counseling or follow through with assignments given during the counseling process. Instead, a counselor (regardless of whether or not he/she is from the Appalachian culture) needs to convey respect to the client along with a genuine sense of warmth and compassion. The counselor must also seek to understand the issues involving the client and the internal and external resources available to the client.

The Appalachian value of Personalism may also effect the building of a relationship with an Appalachian client. According to Jones (1994), one of the main goals of life for an Appalachian person is to relate well

to others. Jones also states that because it is important for an Appalachian person to get along with everyone, he or she may sometimes appear to agree with another person when in fact he or she does not. A person from Appalachia might at times give the appearance of agreeing to attend a particular meeting when in fact he or she has no intention of attending. The person's behavior is not meant to be malicious, but instead the person is trying to be agreeable. Jones states that this tendency has led outsiders to accuse some Appalachians of not being reliable. In the context of counseling, the value of Personalism can have many implications. To begin with, clients who are unsure about counseling might agree to set up an appointment even though they know they will not attend the appointment. Secondly, clients might be asked by the counselor to carry out a particular task between session meetings. The client exercising the value of Personalism would agree during the counseling session to do the task, even though the client had no intention of doing what was being asked of him/her. If the counselor is unaware of the value of Personalism, he or she could quickly become frustrated with the client and surmise that the client was not motivated to change or improve his/her life, an assumption that is most likely untrue. The task of the counselor would then be to seek to build a more collaborative relationship with the client and to establish goals for the client that both the counselor and client agree upon.

The Treatment Stage of Counseling:

During the treatment stage of counseling, the client will often be required to put a plan of action into place in his/her life. This requires the client to actively work to bring about the changes he/she would like to see happen. According to Jones (1994), there are a few Appalachian values that can keep a client from "putting his or her best foot, or either foot, forward" during this stage. Jones states that many Appalachians have a "fatalistic religious attitude" that contributes to the perspective of "what will be will be" in regard to social problems and public responsibility. Jones further states that "A Calvinistic attitude toward the human condition might inhibit him or her from trying to change the nature and behavior of people." Because a wealth of social problems now exist in Appalachia, it is possible that many Appalachians might experience feelings of helplessness. Whether it is through not knowing what to do or feeling like nothing they do will be enough, clients can become "stuck" and either regress or fail to progress in their treatment. This can be a very challenging time for both the client and the counselor. During this phase of treatment the counselor might need to use confrontational or challenging interventions through pointing out discrepancies between a client's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors

which may be preventing the client from functioning effectively in their lives (Loganbill et al., 1982). During this phase it will also be important for the counselor to uncover the client's unused strengths and challenge underdeveloped skills the client possesses.

The Appalachian values of independence, self-reliance, and pride can also be utilized by the effective counselor during this stage. According to Jones (1994), "Appalachians value self-reliance, doing things for themselves." If the client is able to work through the feelings of helplessness that might be encountered during the treatment phase, he or she will hopefully be able to identify ways his or her life has improved and what he or she has done to make that happen. The Appalachian client who is able to see the accomplishments he or she has made will be more likely to continue to seek ways of improving his/her life and the larger society around him/her. Counselors who are willing to give the Appalachian client room to make errors can also reap significant rewards from seeing that client utilize self reliance to develop further skills. (Hicks, 2004).

Conclusion

It is important for a counselor working in Appalachia with Appalachian clients to know and understand the Appalachian culture and its values. A counselor working with Appalachian clients will need to work within those values in order to establish a positive and collaborative counseling relationship. Being familiar with the Appalachian values and how these values will play a role in the client's thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors, can prevent the counselor (particularly one not of Appalachian descent) from becoming frustrated or burned out when roadblocks or set backs occur.

Appalachians are a culturally unique group whose members live primarily in a limited geographic area and who are bound by a recognizable and documented set of common values, traits, or characteristics. When these traits, values, and characteristics are recognized and appropriately addressed, they can serve as a source of strength in both counselors and clients and can be utilized to facilitate growth in both counselors and clients.

Appalachians are a clearly definable minority group and continue to be discriminated against in the mainstream on a daily basis. The implementation and use of these criteria for recognizing and treating Appalachians can be a forceful and effective tool which could greatly enhance the success of any

treatment regimen in any setting in the Appalachian region. It is the sincere hope of the authors that these traits, characteristics and values can be employed in mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, medical, and psychiatric settings within the region.

References

- Arnow, H. S. (1996). *Flowering of the Cumberland*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Caudill, H. M. (1962). *Night comes to the Cumberlands: A biography of a depressed area*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Hicks, R. D. (2004) Clinical supervision of counselors in Appalachia: A culturally appropriate model. *Unpublished Manuscript*.
- Jones, L. (1994). *Appalachian values*. Ashland, KY: The Jesse Stuart Foundation.
- Kimbrough, D. (2002). *Taking up serpents: Snake handlers of Eastern Kentucky*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- Lee, W. M. (1999). *An introduction to multicultural counseling*. Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Loganbill, C., Hardy, E., & Delworth, U. (1982). Supervision: A conceptual model. *Counseling Psychologist, 10*, 3-42.
- Raitz, K. B. and Ulack, R. (1984). *Appalachia: A regional geography*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Slone, V.M. (1979). *What my heart wants to tell*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Smith, R. D. (2000). *Can't you hear me callin': The life of bill Monroe, father of bluegrass*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Still, J. (1975). *The wolfpen rusties: Appalachian riddles and gee-haw whimmy diddles*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.