

COMPARING COPING SKILLS IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

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The purpose of my project was to develop and conduct a culturally appropriate coping skills workshop at the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC) and at a Cambodian school with adolescent girls. In my work at a local crisis center in Defiance, Ohio, I have learned how coping skills can be used to overcome crisis. I hoped that my project would help the Cambodian women and adolescent girls that I worked with learn how to identify coping skills that they could use to attain more emotionally stable lives. I also wanted to learn the culturally appropriate methods of teaching coping skills in Cambodia.

Two research questions guided the preparation for my project in Cambodia:

- ◆ What are the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures?
- ◆ How do the coping skills of people in these two kinds of cultures differ?

There are many differences between individualistic and collectivistic. "While the Western American culture has been predominantly described as individualistic, with individuals seeking independence from each other, the Asian culture has historically been known to foster a collectivistic perspective, wherein individuals are seen as maintaining a fundamental relatedness to each other" (Inman et al., 2007). In the collectivistic culture, it is valued and expected to be "attending to others, maintaining interdependence and harmony in relations, and fitting in" (Ibid). Within the individualistic culture, the people value "privacy, personal space, and individualism" (Ibid).

The Asian culture values hierarchies, loyalty, and respect for elders and parents. They also have strong beliefs that "individuals' actions and behaviors reflect the welfare and integrity of the family. Family needs supersede individual needs, and having an identity separate from the family is discouraged" (Ibid).

In the collectivistic culture as people develop stressors, they are more likely to discuss them within the family. In the Asian culture, it is also a belief that "pain (or stress) and pleasure are part of suffering, with suffering being a lifelong process. Within this context, suffering is to be accepted and tolerated and is even seen as necessary for salvation" (Ibid).

The collectivistic and individualistic cultures have differences when it comes to the roles women and men play in the home and society. It is a tradition in the Asian culture that men work outside of the house and women are to work in the household. In America, women and men both work outside of the home. Asian women tend to have less control over social and economic resources than their American counterparts, who have more contact with the world outside of their home (Ibid).

There are different expectations from adolescents in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. American culture places a huge emphasis on expressing thoughts and feelings, whereas in an Asian culture, it is disrespectful to express thoughts and feelings outside of the family (Ibid). When it comes to career expectations, American culture emphasizes personal choice, whereas Asian cultures emphasize children responding to the expectations of their parents. American culture treats adolescent dating as normal, whereas Asian cultures tend to teach adolescents that “dating would interfere with education and a successful career” (Ibid).

There are many differences in the ways collectivistic and individualistic cultures cope. “In individualistic cultures (such as the United States) there is a strong emphasis on personal autonomy and control whereas, in collectivistic cultures (such as China, Japan, Thailand, etc.), there is a focus on interpersonal harmony and connectedness” (Ibid). Within an individualistic culture, emotions and avoidance are tied to mental health. From this perspective coping skills are developed in the individualistic culture. On the other hand, in a collectivistic culture, coping is done through “social support networks, familial ties, indigenous healers, religious and spiritual outlets” (Ibid).

PROJECT DESIGN

My project consisted of developing four half-hour sessions about coping skills. I designed the project before we left for Cambodia and tested with a group of American women. The sessions were divided into the following components: introduction, identify participants’ coping skills, identify when they use coping skills, and review and affirm the coping skills the participants use or plan to use in their lives. During the introduction, a piece of paper was taped to the back of each participant. Each person then wrote a compliment about on the piece of paper on each participant’s back. At the end of the exercise, the participants removed the paper and read the compliments that everyone wrote about them. Then, the participants had to say one thing they liked about themselves out loud. This activity allowed the participants to build trust in each other while building their own self-esteem. In session two, the participants’ coping skills were identified.



The participants wrote the answer to the question “What do you or your friends do when they are unhappy to make themselves feel better?” This exercise allowed the participants to identify the coping skills they use. At this time, I gave the participants examples of times I use coping skills in my life. Then, I explained that a coping skill is what works for you to get your bottled up emotions out when you are unhappy. This helped participants to understand their answers as identifying coping skills. In session three, the participants identified situations in which they use coping skills. I gave examples of situations in my life when I would utilize coping skills. My examples enable the participants to identify situations in which they utilize coping skills in their own lives. In session four, I reviewed the coping skills and situations by reading the lists they came up with in the previous sessions. My review of the lists gave participants ideas from the coping skills other people use and try some of them in their own lives. The idea was to add to their inventory of coping skills by teaching new ones.

While in Cambodia, I met with colleagues from CWCC to learn more about their feelings on how coping skills are utilized in Cambodia. Through talking to them, I learned that although Cambodians may have utilized coping skills in their everyday lives, they were unfamiliar with the phrase I also found it interesting that there was not a translation for the term because Cambodians were saying the two words in English. When I originally designed the workshops, I had included the use of reading and writing

exercises. Once I talked to the CWCC staff, I learned that most of the women who enter the shelter are illiterate; however, the adolescent girls in school were literate. After gaining a better understanding of the groups that I would be working with, I re-examined and adjusted my workshop according to the two populations' literacy levels.

After talking to the counselor, I conducted the coping skills workshop women who were victims of domestic violence. Throughout the workshop, the women began to open up and tell their stories. As they told their stories, I was able to learn about all the hardships they had experienced in their lives. One woman considered her encouraging the children at the shelter to go to school as a way of coping with never having the opportunity to do so herself. She felt better because she was encouraging the children to take advantage of opportunities that she never had.

Seven adolescent girls volunteered to take part in my workshop at the school. At the beginning of the workshop during an icebreaker in the first session, I asked the girls to say one good thing about themselves. Two out of the seven adolescent girls were unable to say one thing they liked about themselves out loud. My translator told me they had very low self-esteem. My workshop was probably too short to really help these girls.

RESPONSE

Overall, I discovered that the coping skills that are utilized in Cambodia are the same ones that are utilized in the United States, but all the research I did stated that Americans and Cambodians utilize different coping skills. During the workshops, I learned that we actually utilize the same coping skills during the same types of situations. Some of the coping skills that the adolescent girls expressed that they used included playing with their siblings or friends, going for a walk, listening to music, and singing, are some of the same coping skills that are utilized in the United States. Some of the situations that could cause the adolescent girls to need coping skills include school, studying, parents, friends, or siblings having a conflict are the same as those used in the United States. At the shelter, the Cambodian women's responses were identical those of American women in the same situations. The coping skills that Cambodian women identified were also identical to those identified in the United States.

The pilot sessions that I developed tested the relevance of teaching coping skills to two populations of women in Cambodia. The next step is to train Cambodians to lead the workshops themselves.

REFLECTIONS

It seems to me that Americans take the resources and opportunities they have for granted. Cambodia is struggling with helping people with their physical health. It appears to me that the government has barely started to look into ways to help Cambodians with their emotional and mental health. Women at CWCC have an opportunity to talk to a counselor, but the counselor does not have enough resources to help all of her clients as much as she would like. I worry that I may have opened a door that may never be closed with the adolescent girls that I worked with. They may never receive any type of counseling that will help them with their self-esteem. I wonder what kind of lives they will lead.

REFERENCE

Inman, A.G., Leong, F.T., Ebreo, A., Kinoshita, L., Yang, L.H., & Fu, M. (2007). Handbook of Asian American Psychology. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. Pp. 323-339.

