

## Article 16

# **Seven Common Issues Faced by Families Entering a New Culture, With Appropriate Counseling Techniques**

Russell Fulmer

Fulmer, Russell, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas. Dr. Fulmer is a Licensed Professional Counselor who spent four years teaching at medical schools in the Caribbean. His interests include cross-cultural issues, normative ethics, and positive psychology.

The family unit is by definition dynamic and hence an ever changing group (Day, 2009). Like most groups, families attempt to maintain their equilibrium and operate on a homeostatic balance governed by power structure, norms, intra-psychic mechanisms of individual group members, and systemic influences of the greater culture (Gehart, 2009). Any change encountered by a family, rather it be received favorably or negatively, brings stress on the family system (Wedding & Stuber, 2010). When a family culturally relocates, special challenges may arise that strain the family in previously unknown and unprepared for ways. However, the good news is that even traumatic life changes may present opportunities for growth (Taku, 2011). This holds true for individuals and families.

Many contemporary counselors see a multicultural clientele (Sue & Sue, 2007). The competent multicultural counselor is equipped with awareness, knowledge, and skills of sufficient quality to effectively assist a diverse client base (Lee, Blando, Mizelle, & Orozco, 2007). With aspirations of building counselors' knowledge bases, seven issues faced by families new to a culture are presented in this paper. Additionally, for skill development, a counseling technique is presented after each issue. Important to note is that the listing of seven issues is not comprehensive, nor are the seven mentioned necessarily the most important. It is important to note that each family is unique. Families may encounter issues concerning legalities, language, acculturation, and religion, in addition to the seven presented in this paper. Establishing rapport with clients and using the mentioned techniques only in accordance with the specifics of each case and the counselor's clinical judgment are strongly recommended.

### **Culture Shock**

Culture shock is difficult to define but is characterized "by discomfort and anxiety resulting from difficulty in interacting in an unfamiliar social and communicative context" (Dale, 1996). The active ingredient of culture shock appears to be the substance of the phenomena that disallows people from getting their needs met as they would in

their own culture (Davis, 2005). Culture shock challenges whether or not the family move was a wise one. To stay or to return – that becomes the question, and that could become a major issue. Regret is a known feeling for most people, as most people regret at least some decisions. But uprooting and moving a family into unknown territory is a higher level of change in terms of magnitude and consequence for oneself and loved ones than most choices. Further affecting the quandary is that multiple people are usually involved and hence multiple viewpoints desire to be heard. For instance, a husband who wishes to stay and a wife who longs for a return, or parents deciding to return and children who all desire to stay in their new home.

**Skill.** Education can be beneficial, such as introducing a culture shock model. While some clients may not know what culture shock is, many more will be unaware that it is common and people often progress through stages of adaption. Normalizing the experience helps the family feel less alone. Walking them through the stages of culture shock helps the family understand what they are feeling and may feel in the near future, as well as provides hope for normalcy. The five stages of culture shock (Pedersen, 1995) that can be reviewed with the family are as follows.

1. The honeymoon stage. This is a euphoric, holiday-like stage that inevitably passes, leaving behind a reality filled with uncertainty.
2. The disintegration stage. When the honeymoon ends, demands of the new, harsh reality overwhelm the individual and the person feels deficient in facing these requirements.
3. The reintegration stage. The person learns ways to cope, but resents having to make such adjustments. Feelings of inferiority persist.
4. The autonomy stage. This stage is characterized by moderation. The person no longer entirely resents his or her new homeland, and sees both positives and negatives of the new life.
5. The interdependence stage. The person has reinvented him or herself and an individual capable of functioning in the new and old cultures emerges. There is no longer anxiety, anger, or resentment towards the new culture, although ways of the old culture may remain in the person's worldview. The individual has managed to synthesize old and new.

### **Struggles With Enculturation**

Enculturation is “the degree to which a person adheres to the values and behaviors of an indigenous or ethnic culture” (del Prado & Church, 2010). Families bring with them habits of standardized and normed behavior from another culture. Many of these norms do not coincide with the accepted standard of living in the adopted culture. The family has three options of dealing with the discrepancy: 1) Adopt the new culture and relinquish the old. 2) Keep the old culture and struggle against the new. 3) Balance the old with the new, ultimately arriving at a synthesis of the two. This is much easier said than done. Some belief systems may be perceived as incompatible. Integrating the two entities is a challenge and trying may bring about a strange hybridization for the family equivalent to a machine with parts from a car, truck, and moped.

**Skill.** Exactly how old and new balance is up to the particular family, but an astute counselor knows to process this with his/her client. The solution-focused technique called the *first session formula task* is applicable here: “Between now and the next time

we meet, I would like you to observe, so you can describe to me next time, what happens in your family that you would like to have continue to have happen” (de Shazer, 1985). This task is based on the presumption that a rapid resolution of problems is possible (O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 2003). It also opens the door to solutions and focuses the family’s attention on ways in which old and new naturally fit together.

### **Anxiety From Change**

Change, even good change, inherently brings anxiety (Biali, 2010). People who experience change with high frequency and intensity could be at increased risk of depression (Fountoulakis, Iacovides, Kaprinis, & Kaprinis, 2006). Classic research by Holmes and Rahe (1967) demonstrated how events as joyous as a holiday or exciting as a vacation still bring change and hence add to a person’s stress level. More pertinent and pressing is the relationship these psychiatrists found between stress and physical health. In this study, life events were quantified according to their intensity (i.e., the degree of stress they commonly evoke onto people) and titled *life change units* (LCU’s). More stressful events received higher scores, such as the death of a spouse getting a 100, the maximum score. The inventory is called the Social Readjustment and Ratings Scale (SRRS). Some examples relating more specifically to families relocating to another culture include:

- Dismissal from work, 47 LCU’s
- Change in financial state, 39 LCU’s
- Change in different line of work, 37 LCU’s
- Spouse starts or stops work, 26 LCU’s
- Change in living conditions, 25 LCU’s
- Revision of personal habits, 24 LCU’s
- Christmas, 12 LCU’s

More life change units likely encountered by families are listed, such as change in residence and change in schools. Findings indicate that getting over 300 LCU’s in one year correlates with an 80% chance of developing an illness. LCU’s equaling at least 150 are associated with approximately a 50% chance of illness, and below 150 a 35% chance.

**Skill.** Teaching the family time management can help. From a Rational-Emotive-Behavioral-Therapeutic approach, helping clients identify and then challenge or substitute self-defeating thoughts can be beneficial (Ellis & Dryden, 2007). Using this technique, called ABC, family members are taught that change, any change, is an Activating event (A). Their Belief (B) about the event causes the Consequent (C) emotional disturbance. The counselor helps the family identify where exactly the anxiety stems from and clarifies for them that few events inherently cause stress. Rather, it is the person’s belief about the event that causes stress. Change or modify the belief and the consequent action must change as well.

### **Anxiety About Family Members Left Behind**

Anxiety is akin to worry, and a family who has left behind extended family members worries about those loved ones – those people who are now, in many cases, hundreds or thousands of miles away from them. What if my aging mother’s health takes a turn for the worse? Am I missing out on seeing my nieces and nephews grow up? Am I

shirking the duties I have to my parents? There is no shortage of what-ifs to consider, as there is a deep supply of possible disasters one can conjure.

**Skill.** This issue is one of many that can spiral family members into depression. Be on alert for the cognitive triad of depression: negatively perceiving oneself, negative interpretation of external events, and holding a negative view of the future (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1987). Cognitive restructuring can help counteract the dangerous effects of depression and anxiety (Roberts, Hoop, & Heinrich, 2009). One method of cognitive restructuring first identifies if a family member is committing a thinking error, which likely would be overestimation or catastrophizing. Overestimation is believing a negative event will occur even though the event is highly unlikely to happen. Catastrophizing is the thought that once a negative event happens, it will be severe and the person will be unable to manage it (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 2011). After the errors in thinking are identified, the family is assisted by completing homework and in-session discussion that leads to a more realistic cognitive framework for handling illogical or self-debilitating thinking.

### **Isolation vs. Sociability**

In new territory, the family understands that any one of its members, or even the family as a whole, can essentially be isolated from the community at large by way of not being accepted. People have a need to feel special, let alone merely tolerated. No one wants to feel like a second or third class citizen. There is evidence that certain mental conditions place younger people especially at risk for social withdrawal, such as those diagnosed with a social phobia, depression, tendency for violence, and those with less emotional bonds with their families (Watanabe, Matsui, & Takatsuka, 2010).

When seeing a family in counseling, ironically enough, individual members can feel isolated in the session. This often reflects real life, with the same person often feeling isolated in family and social life. Yet again the same person is on the margin of a group. He or she may be tagged an outcast, a rebel, or eccentric. This person may act out and have gotten into trouble with the law (Forsbrey, Frabutt, & Smith, 2005). On the other hand, this individual may be quietly withdrawn, speaking and sharing little. Finding solace in the safe confines of their inner world, this person may also turn to a hobby, music, art, or even drugs or violence (Cormier, Rice, & Harris, 2005).

**Skill.** Author Matthew Selekman (1993) uses a technique called *working the other side of the fence* when in family counseling with troubled adolescents. A modification of the technique can be used when assisting people who feel misunderstood in general, not just difficult youth. If doing family counseling, the counselor gives the isolated person some one-on-one time. Serving as an advocate, the counselor can inquire about how he or she (the counselor) can advocate for them. This gives insight into the needs of the neglected person. For a family who feels isolated, the counselor can help develop a realistic assessment of the family's strengths and what each member has to offer. The counselor can connect the family with community resources, such as local groups of like-minded people. Reinforcing the importance of connecting with others socially is important. Sometimes encouragement can be enough to nudge the family into establishing a social network, which negatively correlates with depression (Domino & Domino, 2006)

### **Conflict and Practicalities**

Family conflict may be nothing new for a family, but the composition of the conflict may be different when it is generated by a cultural move. Suddenly new issues arise, issues generated by previously unknown and hence unprepared for cultural adjustments. For example, a family accustomed to urban opportunity and involvement could struggle upon moving to a rural community (Yang, Tian, & van Oudenhoven, 2010). But for parents, few issues bring more distress than knowing or even perceiving something to be awry with their children (Weitzman, Edmonds, Davagnino, & Briggs-Gowan, 2011). Parents who feel there is something wrong with their child carry a heavy burden around with them that infiltrates and affects their health, work lives, and even marriage. With many immigrant families, even if the children are safe, money concerns permeate family life (Theodorou, 2011). Families lacking in monetary, social, and cultural resources are in danger of becoming socially excluded. Excluded families are in perpetual survival mode, forced to tend to basic needs at the expense of higher-order aspirations. The dynamic between parents and their children may also suffer (Mitchell & Campbell, 2011). But money has its limits. Research does suggest a relationship between money and happiness, but only to an extent. Analysis of data from survey respondents indicated that emotional well-being rose in conjunction with income up to about \$75,000 a year (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Those who made below \$75,000 reported less happiness and more sadness and stress. For a family struggling to adapt to a new way of life, money can be one more worry, one more stressor on top of numerous others.

**Skill.** Research has done more than provide studies highlighting the relationship between money and happiness. Research in the field of positive psychology provides techniques demonstrated to increase subjective well-being and possibly even abate mild to moderate depression (Seligman, 2004). One intervention enlists a strengths-based approach, literally. Employing this approach, the counselor would begin by having each family member identify his or her personal strengths. Validated inventories for helping with this process are readily available online and free of charge (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). The next step involves having the family members use each of their signature strengths in innovative ways each day for at least one week. For example, humor is one of a possible 24 signature strengths. The humorous individual may choose to set a goal to make each family member laugh every day for the week. Consistent utilization of strengths is associated with happiness (Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2010). Happiness has a way of placing everyday worries in good perspective.

### **Morality**

Personal morality deals with matters of right and wrong. Yet morality is heavily influenced by society at large (Moser & Carson, 2000). What this means is that a person's notion of the right thing to do or the wrong thing to do is governed, in large part if not exclusively, by what a given culture says is right and wrong. This concept is called cultural relativism, or basing one's standards of right and wrong off cultural demands. Some philosophers suggest that labeling something right or wrong just because a culture says so is sketchy if not downright untenable (Huemer, 2008). However, many people, and hence families, practice cultural relativism. Transplant a family into a culture with different morals than their native culture and extreme distress may ensue. These families feel torn, pressured, and confused. If a family member adheres to absolutist dictums of a

religion – dictums that may seem incompatible with life in the new culture – the distress may be more severe. In this case, the person feels there is no room for compromise, for they feel that compromising would violate God's law.

**Skill.** Group counseling or a support group of people who are undergoing something similar can be useful for families or individuals struggling through questions of morality. Counselors employing an existential approach can process with family members until a recognized purpose in life is found, all the while encouraging the family to become responsible, confident people (Corey, 2008). The family struggling with issues of morality is contending with deeply held, heartfelt, personal beliefs. As always, the importance of a good counselor-client relationship cannot be overstated. Active listening, genuine caring, and skill are needed for effectiveness.

Transitioning families face myriad obstacles. Each family is unique, as is each individual within the family. The above list is by no means inclusive of every issue families new to a culture could encounter. Counselors are encouraged to recognize the special circumstances of these families along with developing a skill-set conducive to helping families in need. The culturally competent counselor possesses knowledge, awareness, and skill.

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