Chapter 12
Solutions-Oriented Intervention Models for African American Mental Health

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Issues pertaining to social justice and recognition of racial disparities have influenced national conversations regarding mental health in the African American community in an effort to normalize discussion. Studies have shown that mental health stigma can impact African Americans' perceptions of treatment and decisions to seek counseling (Baillargeon, 2014; Mishra et al., 2009). The stigma can be attributed to attitudes about mental health challenges, lack of knowledge in treatment options, and even shame in needing mental health support. However, as more African Americans gain comfort with seeking support from a counselor, it is increasingly important that counseling professionals become competent in treating African American clients. This includes adequate clinical training in multiculturally competent approaches and self-reflection of the counselor's level of acculturation (Bounds et al., 2018). Additionally, multicultural competency incorporates professional advocacy for increased access to and awareness of behavioral health services for members of the African American community. To support counselors with navigating these areas, this chapter highlights solutions-oriented interventions using three frameworks to guide culturally responsive practices for counseling African American clients.

Ecological Systems Model

Bronfenbrenner (1979) introduced the ecological systems theory as a framework for understanding how different environmental structures influence an individual's relational connections within the world, including one's social interactions and inherited cultural perceptions. Ecological systems theory has been used in

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counseling and psychology research to examine interventions for children and adolescents, explore systemic influences in counselor preparation programs, and study the influences of subsystems on individual behavior from a multicultural perspective (Abrams et al., 2005; Lau & Ng, 2014; Mobley, 2001). The value of an ecological approach in counseling is the focus on how various systems influence an individual's self-perception and interrelationships. A thoughtful investigation of these environmental systems enables the counselor to understand how structural elements present as supports or barriers to crucial opportunities and experiences throughout an individual's life. Because of the very nature of examining systemic contexts within this framework, an ecological approach can be meaningful in working with African American clients.

Five environmental systems exist in ecological systems theory that either directly or indirectly affect roles, behavior, and interpersonal relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Microsystems refer to the relationships and interactions within a person's immediate setting that have a direct impact on that person's development. The mesosystem involves interactions that occur between various existing microsystems, such as a person's home, work, or neighborhood. The exosystem is the influence of external systems that a person may not have direct connection to but inevitably could have an impact on that person, such as a spouse's or parent's workplace. Macrosystems are cultural institutions and ideologies, such as religion and societal norms, that shape microsystems. Lastly, the chronosystem refers to historical and environmental events that occur throughout one's lifetime. All systems collectively interinfluence a person's existence in the world within different settings.

Ecological systems theory has been used in education and social sciences research to explore workplace relationships, new family adjustments, and racial disparities in maternal health care (Noursi et al., 2020; Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005; Tissington, 2008). Because an ecological outlook supports understanding of cultural customs and norms, societal influences, and ideology development, using this framework supports a multicultural approach to counseling and a deeper understanding of sociopolitical influences on racially diverse clients, aligning with the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts et al., 2015). More specifically, this approach can support mental health professionals and community-based agencies while carefully deconstructing their role and obligation in eliminating barriers to better serve African American clients.

The counseling relationship ideally begins with the counselor's conceptualization of the client to better understand the presenting problem; this essential step involves deeper exploration of who the client is and what the client brings to therapy. There will likely be some examination of environmental influences that have had a direct impact on the client's development, relationships, and worldview. As the counselor works to support the client, either in relying on or challenging these influences, the focus will likely shift to microsystems, highlighting daily interactions that are foundational to the client's interpersonal functioning. Thus, through direct treatment and intervention, the counselor is working with the client to examine microsystemic components. Additionally, because macrosystems represent expanded cultural contexts that fundamentally influence microsystems, it is likely

that the counselor will explore this occurrence throughout the counseling process as well. Consequently, the microsystem and macrosystem are focuses within the ecological systems theory that a counselor will likely interact with most often through direct client work, although it is important not to diminish relevance of the exosystem and chronosystem and still acknowledge related impacts. Nonetheless, culturally responsive practice involves the counselor's accepted responsibility to advocate for the client on microsystemic and macrosystemic levels through direct and indirect counseling support.

Multicultural competence in counseling requires that counselors understand who their clients are culturally and identify the best approaches in working with diverse clients. Understanding clients' background, family, cultural, and societal influences should naturally involve examining microsystemic and macrosystemic impacts. The counselor can do this by applying an ecological approach. However, the ecological approach alone does not address extended professional needs for cultural competency and skill development in counseling African American clients. Therefore, cultural broaching (Day-Vines et al., 2007) and the Multicultural Counseling and Social Justice Competencies (Ratts et al., 2015) are discussed as complementary to the ecological systems outlook.

Cultural Broaching

A multiculturally competent counselor has awareness of ways culture, identity, race, and ethnicity influence clients' personality development, self-concept, and world perspective (Ratts et al., 2015). Culturally responsive counseling should involve the counselor's continual reflection of how personal biases, attitudes, and cultural values either assist or obstruct the counseling process. In order to prevent the latter, the practice of cultural broaching upholds the counselor's persistent consideration of multiculturalism throughout the therapeutic process and within professional advocacy. Cultural broaching refers to the counselor's commitment to exploring issues of diversity and acknowledging these issues within the client-counselor dynamic (Day-Vines et al., 2007). This includes accepting differences between the background of the client and counselor and the counselor's willingness to initiate discussions that address these along with the racial and cultural experiences of the client (p. 402). The counselor commits to understanding how aspects of race, ethnicity, and culture influence how a client is positioned in the world.

Within cultural broaching, there is emphasis on the implementation of multicultural counseling competencies in a counselor's practice (Day-Vines et al., 2007, p. 404). Five broaching styles are identified: avoidant, isolating, continuing/incongruent, integrated/congruent, and infused. Counselors' reflection of broaching style can support self-identification of where they lie on the continuum regarding counseling practice and professional identity. Additionally, understanding broaching behaviors is helpful for counselors' examination of how they maneuver race-related topics with clients.

Avoidant broaching behaviors reflect the counselor's minimization of racial differences and the concept of societal racial oppression. An avoidant counselor would likely elude discussing issues of race with the client. An isolating counselor may engage in discussing race-related issues but only at the surface. In this case, the action is regarded as a simple task to demonstrate multicultural competence rather than an instilled process within the counselor's role and identity. The isolating cultural broaching style may be due to a counselor's discomfort with deep inquiry into matters of race or lack of clinical training in culturally considerate practices. Counselors with a continuing/incongruent broaching style visibly acknowledge race and culture but struggle with effectively implementing multicultural practices into an identified counseling approach. Additionally, the continuing/incongruent counselor may lack deep appreciation or understanding of how multifaceted a client's culture is, relying mostly on stereotypical and uninformed perceptions. The integrated/congruent cultural broaching style reflects the counselors' ability to engage in ongoing practice incorporating race and culture into their counseling orientation. They are able to effectively distinguish between aspects of culture versus individualistic experiences within client's stories, including the ability to adequately recognize maladaptive behaviors that are specific to the client. Lastly, an infusing broaching style goes a step beyond integrated/congruent, representing a strong commitment to issues of social justice as a significant element of the counselor's professional identity.

It is important to consider that broaching styles may align with counselors' professional development, with beginning counselors possibly presenting as avoidant or isolating due to lack of experience and training in exploring issues of diversity and social justice in the client-counselor relationship that requires the counselor to do additional personal identity work. However, lack of willingness to develop multicultural competence or seeing it as secondary to counseling practice could be an issue for counselors at any level of development. Ideally, when counselors implement integrated/congruent or infused cultural broaching styles, they are effectively recognizing and applying best practices in their work with African American clients.

Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015) are foundational to multicultural and social justice-related practices in counseling. The MSJCC identify four domains that lead to development of multicultural and social justice competence: counselor self-awareness, client worldview, counseling relationship, and counseling and advocacy interventions. The first three domains (counselor self-awareness, client worldview, and counseling relationship) categorize beliefs, knowledge, skills, and actions a counselor should demonstrate to show competency in the related areas. Competencies in counseling and advocacy interventions characterize counselor advocacy actions for the client on greater structural and systemic levels. This includes supporting clients by recognizing

internalized privilege and oppression and guiding discovery of self-awareness of these concepts. This domain also involves counselors' direct work within the community to better understand clients they serve. While the counselor self-awareness domain focuses on exploration of social identities and issues of race, power, privilege, and oppression, the client worldview and counselor relationship domains present competencies for adequately working with both privileged and marginalized clients from an informed multicultural and social justice perspective.

The MSJCC connect the importance of counselors being culturally aware when working with African American clients. In order to adequately support clients, counselors must be willing to explore societal influences and systemic structures that may be attached to mental health stigma or that could possibly impede successful outcomes in mental health treatment. Particularly, counselors from privileged backgrounds must be willing to acknowledge personal biases and attitudes and navigate the discomfort that comes with deep personal self-investigation. This is all in concurrence with the commitment to working against larger structures that endorse oppressive practices against African American clients.

The three presented frameworks (ecological systems theory, cultural broaching, and the MSJCC) share a common feature of recognizing the influence of environmental and societal systems on personal development and experiences. Furthermore, each upholds the counselors' implementation of multicultural and socially conscious counseling practices. The process of developing multicultural competence contrasts between individuals from privileged backgrounds and those from historically oppressed groups. However, despite the group identification of the counselor, it is essential to operate from a framework that is not only culturally responsive but also culturally relevant when working with African American clients. This can be done with an integrated ecological and culturally responsive approach.

Integrated Approach to Solutions-Oriented Interventions

A key to understanding how an ecological systems approach in conjunction with cultural broaching and the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) work in counseling practice is considering what these actions might look like on behalf of a counselor who works with African American clients. Solutions-oriented interventions go beyond information-gathering and problem conceptualization to emphasizing action steps toward resolution. Taking a solutions-oriented approach is supportive of counselors' efforts to reduce obstructions to mental health treatment for African American clients. Efforts guided by the integrated framework can be identified in the following areas:

Counselor-Focused, Solutions-Oriented Interventions

Counselor-focused, solutions-oriented interventions are professional development-influenced actions that directly and indirectly support reducing barriers to treatment for African American clients. For example, a counselor's lack of awareness of historically oppressive actions against African American clients and limitations in applying relevant approaches and interventions could act as a barrier to a client-seeking treatment. These actions also involve counselors' work in personal identity and race development and instilling this in their professional identity. Counselors' actions in this area are supported by multicultural and social justice competencies (Ratts et al., 2015). When considering interventions in this area, counselors should ask, "How am I increasing my competence in multicultural and social justice counseling and advocacy?" or "How am I disconnected from my African American clients and what steps can I take to address this?" The following are examples of solutions-oriented interventions that are counselor-focused:

- Participate in regular training activities (via professional conferences or academic presentations) that are focused on increasing counselors' multicultural competence and awareness.
- Engage in race-related discussions or professional development aimed at increasing counselors' awareness of systemic challenges affecting African Americans and increasing counselors' comfort with discussing these issues.

Client-Focused, Solutions-Oriented Interventions

Client-focused, solutions-oriented interventions are actions the counselor takes to actively reduce barriers to treatment for their African American clients; these actions might overlap counselor-focused actions due to the direct focus of increasing counselors' multicultural competence in professional work. Essential to solutions-oriented actions in this area is the counselors' ability to effectively and comfortably broach issues of race in the therapeutic relationship (Day-Vines et al., 2007) and recognize microsystemic and macrosystemic impacts in the client's story. These actions should be guided by the counselors' ongoing reflection of racial or cultural differences in the counselor-client relationship and the counselors' use of effective, appropriate interventions that are both culturally responsive and client-specific (Asnaani & Hoffman, 2012). Also important is the counselor's acknowledgement that each client is unique, dispelling any assumptions that every African American client shares the same struggle (Bounds et al., 2018). A counselor might reflect by asking, "What does my client personally need from me?" and "How have microsystemic and macrosystemic influences worked for/against my client?" Solutions-oriented interventions in this area may look like the following examples:

- Research and application of evidence-based practices relevant to African American clients as well as interventions that address individual presenting issues.
- Provide resources and referrals with consideration to client needs. The counselor is mindful of the client's preferences, whether culturally or individually influenced, when making referrals for collateral services.

Community-Centered, Solutions-Oriented Interventions

Multicultural competence and culturally responsive practices comprise in-depth knowledge and perspectives of the community that the counselor serves. There is also recognition that systemic elements can differ regionally due to clients' experiences and varying cultural norms within African American communities. Therefore, it is important that counselors personally connect with the community. This is especially imperative when working in predominantly African American neighborhoods. Community connections can contribute to trust-building efforts on behalf of counselors. Counselors can reflect in this area by asking, "What are the general problems in this community and what role does mental healthcare play?" or "Who are the trusted members in the community that can align with reducing macrosystemic barriers?" The following examples demonstrate solutions-oriented interventions in this area:

- Collaboration through community partnerships*.* There is benefit in developing community partnerships from an ecological perspective (Leonard, 2011). Because African American culture emphasizes connection to the community and identity that is built from individual and collective experiences, it would be beneficial for counselors to engage in the culturally responsive act of reducing mental health stigma and making services more easily accessible through community collaboration with organizations such as schools, churches, and community-based nonprofits.
- Invite community members to participate in advisory boards or councils for community mental health agencies. Enlisting board members that reflect the diversity of the community underscores the importance of community connection and client representation.
- For community agencies, prioritize ongoing agency-wide professional development in culturally responsive practices. Participate in community-building efforts such as community-sponsored fundraisers and events.

Profession-Centered, Solutions-Oriented Interventions

Profession-centered, solutions-oriented interventions encompass social justice and advocacy efforts that highlight the importance of these practices within the entire counseling profession. This aligns with the infused cultural broaching style, where social justice advocacy is merged into the counselor's professional identity (Day-Vines et al., 2007). Profession-centered actions also target macrosystemic issues that can be influenced by collective professional efforts, such as advocating for laws that provide equitable access to mental health treatment for African American communities. These actions align with community and advocacy interventions in the MSJCC (Day-Vines et al., 2007) and include recognizing societal structures that are oppressive to African American clients with commitment to actively speaking out against them. Solutions-oriented interventions in this area may include the following:

- Invite members of the African American community to share anecdotes and reflections on mental health needs of the larger community and welcome continued collaboration on state and national advocacy efforts.
- Support professional efforts that include advocacy for or against laws and policies that impact members of the African American community, including opposition to any structures that present as barriers in accessing quality mental health treatment.

While these recommendations are not exhaustive, the hope is to provide counselors a foundation for implementing an integrated ecological and culturally responsive approach. This will require intentional reflection and work in counselor self- and professional development and consistent examination of meaningful approaches to working with African American clients that are inclusive of systemic considerations and client advocacy efforts. A case approach is provided to demonstrate how the integrated approach might look in mental health work.

Case Approach

A community mental health agency is conducting an annual evaluation to assess the site's efficacy of services and clinician experiences. The agency, located in a mid-sized suburban city, is situated within a predominantly African American area. Thus, the majority of clients who seek and receive services from the agency are members from the community. The evaluation revealed that client requests for individual and family services have increased by 20% over the past year. Yet, a needs assessment showed that clinicians feel under-equipped to address various presenting challenges of their client caseload, including possessing the skills necessary to treat various behavioral and emotional disorders. The agency's leadership team also recognize that while clients primarily served identify as African American, the agency consists mostly of non-African American staff. It is also recognized that

many of the clinicians are recent graduates who do not live in or come from the agency's community.

Although there has been an increase in clients seeking services, the agency notices a trend with clients discontinuing or becoming inconsistent with treatment within 2 to 3 months of working with their clinicians. The agency attributes this trend to cultural disconnection between counselors and clients and overall lack of institutional multicultural competence. Furthermore, the agency recognizes that the lack of clinical skill development activities contributes to low confidence in clinicians. The agency identifies several areas of improvement that include improving community/client relations and providing more effective training for its clinicians.

The agency decides that an integrated ecological and culturally responsive approach would be beneficial for addressing clinician development and improving client and community outcomes. Counselor-focused interventions will center on professional development in multicultural and social justice competency to support clinicians' ability to effectively serve clients and connect with the community. The agency plans to implement monthly training led by mental health professionals in relevant evidence-based practices and cross-cultural strategies. Client-focused interventions will include a system for gauging ongoing client feedback on treatment. The agency also plans to collaborate with other African American community-based treatment providers for referrals and to build a database of extended culturally relevant resources.

The agency realizes that more strategic and thoughtful actions need to take place organizationally to ensure its efforts directly support the community and advocacy for larger systemic issues that impact clients. This involves inviting members of the community to serve on the agency's board and creating an advisory council that consists of community representatives who provide ongoing critique and recommendations for the agency's services and community-focused efforts. The agency also decides to implement a planning committee that regularly organizes agency-wide advocacy efforts on state and national policies and encourages staff representation in professional counseling organizations.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to support counselors' actions in breaking down mental health barriers for African American clients. Through collective implementation of the ecological systems theory, cultural broaching, and the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies, counselors can take intentional and meaningful steps to producing culturally responsive practices. An integrated approach to solutions-oriented interventions enables a counselor to think strategically about professional actions that can occur on micro- and macrolevels to increase access to culturally inclusive services for the African American community.

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