Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology
A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners
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Culturally competent practitioners

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In this book there are chapters about counseling skills, various frameworks and theories of therapy, issues experienced by individuals and teams, traditional mental skills, and population considerations. One factor overarching all of these elements is culture, or perhaps more accurately, cultures. The population chapters touch on cultures in terms of age, level of sport (e.g., professional sports, Olympics), sexual orientation, community (i.e., rural communities), and disability. The authors of Chapter 14 (acknowledging that cognitive behavioral therapy may have limited application within certain multicultural contexts) and Chapter 35 (stipulating that limited understanding and acceptance of people from different cultural backgrounds can be sources of tension between individuals and subgroups within teams) specifically mentioned culture, but cultures are a factor in every human interaction (and therefore every sport psychology session).

Norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors

We are all cultural beings. Both we and our clients have norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors that have been molded by cultures. Norms are the patterns, models, or standards regarded as typical within a particular culture. For example, when meeting people the cultural norm may be to shake hands, kiss, or just nod. In terms of psychology, in many mainstream cultures the norm for assessment and diagnosis is to use standardized and validated assessment instruments and a diagnostic manual such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In other cultures these forms of assessment and diagnosis may be seen as culturally invalid, with practitioners relying on observation and input from the family or community. Beliefs are opinions or convictions, confidence in the truth or existence of something not immediately susceptible to rigorous proof. Cultures differ in beliefs, for example in terms for and representation of God(s). Examples related to psychology and cultures include beliefs in evidence-based treatment, traditional healers, or healing rituals.

Values refer to relative worth, merit, or importance. Higher education, life experience, age, and accumulation of wealth are examples of values that vary by culture. Western psychologists
tend to value particular models (e.g., medical or biopsychosocial). In other cultures, where moral and spiritual laws are valued, psychological problems may be perceived to result from transgressing these laws.

Cultural behaviors are relatively objective, observed aspects of life such as language, dress, and what and how one eats. In terms of one-on-one psychological consultations, culture can influence punctuality, preferred distance from the psychologist, and whether or not eye contact is made. Norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors are interrelated. For example, in a team in which the time of each member is valued equally, there may be the belief that everyone (e.g., athletes, managers, coaches) should be treated equally, and team members should behave in accordance by arriving at the time a meeting is scheduled to begin. Another team, where the time of senior group members is valued more than that of junior members, beliefs likely reflect that team members have different levels of status, with senior staff and athletes regarded as having the most to offer to team decisions. In this case, junior team members may arrive to team meetings before senior members, with a meeting only beginning after the senior members have arrived (Schinke, Hanrahan, & Catina, 2009).

Culture: more than just nationality or race

We often tend to think of cultures in terms of people in different countries having different cultures. A Japanese kimono, Italian risotto, or Cuban salsa (the dance, not a sauce) are internationally recognized representations of different cultures. With the globalization of society, chances are slim that everyone on a team will have the same national heritage. Even a team that visually appears to be of similar heritage may be of English, German, and Swedish heritage or Ethiopian, Liberian, and Kenyan heritage (although here I would like to point out that there are Black Germans and White Kenyans). Aside from race and nationality, cultures are also determined by factors such as religion, socio-economic status, gender identity, sexuality, (dis)ability, type of sport, club tradition, neighborhood, and even family. Through socialization, groups of people who live in close proximity and/or under similar living conditions develop shared values, beliefs, and norms, as well as behaviors that are conducive to the particular situation.

We have all been enculturated; we have been socialized. We have learned the customs of the society in which we live and the ways of specific social groups within that society. For example, we have learned roles, norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes from family, peers, school, media, coaches, and society in general. How we act can change depending on the social environment in which we find ourselves. For example, I think most of us would have some variance in our behaviors (e.g., dress, tone of voice, specific actions) depending on whether we were in a cathedral, a pub, a hospital, a plane, or at a rock concert. Similarly, cultural norms vary by sport (e.g., synchronized swimming, boxing, surfing, archery.) We can consider these sports as different microcultures. Most people have experienced multiple microcultures.

When individuals experience a different macroculture, they begin a process of acculturation where they start to adopt a culture other than their original culture. When living in a new culture, some individuals retain the practices of their original culture and live in a community with others who have the same background and traditions; some retain their customs and language, but also integrate some of the customs and language of the new culture; bicultural individuals balance the two cultures; and finally, acculturated individuals fully adopt the
ways of the new culture (Thomason, 1991). Because our clients can be in different places along this continuum of acculturation, we cannot assume what their values, norms, and beliefs might be just by being familiar with their culture of origin. It is also possible that clients, in a state of flux and confusion while in the process of acculturation, may benefit from the direct exploration of the differences in values of the culture of origin and the adopted culture. Children of first-generation immigrants may struggle with family friction because children tend to acculturate at a more rapid rate than their parents do (Roemer & Orsillo, 2009).

Within a single team, not only may people have different national heritages, if they are originally from another country (as an aside, 20% of the Australian population was born in a country other than Australia) they will have different enculturation experiences, different levels of acculturation, and different exposure to a potentially huge variety of different microcultures. Identifying a client’s cultural background requires a lot more than simply knowing where they were born. Before worrying about the cultural factors that may influence our clients, however, we should begin with a bit of self-reflection. Particularly true for those of us who are members of the mainstream macroculture (i.e., the majority), we are often unaware of our own cultural identities. Nevertheless, as cultural beings, our values, beliefs, and behaviors are influenced by our cultures.

**Collectivistic and individualistic cultures**

The dominant cultural groups in Western societies such as Europe and the United States are individualistic. Characteristics of individualistic societies include independence, individual achievement, self-expression, individual thinking, personal choice, flexibility in roles, private property, and individual ownership (Ranzijn, McConnochie, & Nolan, 2009). The dominant cultural groups in many Eastern countries and most Indigenous cultures in the world are classified as collectivistic. Characteristics of collectivistic societies include interdependence, group success, adherence to norms, respect for authority and elders, group consensus, hierarchical roles, shared property, and group ownership (Ranzijn et al., 2009). Conflicts or misunderstandings can occur when people are unaware of, or do not accept, the different ways of thinking and acting that can occur when a team has individuals from both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Athletes from individualistic cultures may be used to people owning their own gear, striving for personal bests, taking responsibility for their own fitness or strength training, and making decisions regarding strategy. Those from collectivistic societies may be accustomed to equipment being accessible to anyone, focusing only on team performance, waiting for others to guide them in all aspects of fitness training, and relying on the coach or extremely experienced players to determine strategy. An athlete from a collectivistic culture may use someone else’s equipment (in a team in an individualistic country) with the belief that it is there for use by everyone, but the owner of the gear may think of the action as disrespectful or even theft. What one person may interpret as being slack and not taking responsibility or ownership may be perceived by another as being respectful to those of higher status. How athletes define success and whether one-on-one or group-based psychological interventions are most effective depend in part on whether they are from an individualistic or collectivistic culture (Schinke et al., 2009).

As practitioners we need to be aware of biases we might have, and be vigilant that we do not try to influence our clients to act in ways that are consistent with our own values. For example, psychologists from individualistic cultures may value personal fulfillment and
engagement in personally meaningful activities, whereas athletes from collectivistic cultures may value providing for extended families and contributing to the community. I worked with an athlete from a collectivistic culture who began to miss training sessions and put in less than full effort when at training. Before exploring the situation with the athlete, I was assuming that either he was losing interest in the sport or that he was having issues with motivation. In reality, he was feeling guilty for putting time and effort into his own personal performance when he could be spending time with his family or using the time and energy to do something that might directly benefit his extended family and community.

In addition to collectivism versus individualism, cultures also have been classified in terms of their degrees of power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001). Power distance refers to the power differential between the rulers and those being ruled. Generally, democratic societies have a low power distance, and autocratic societies have a high power distance. If individuals from a culture with a low power distance find themselves in a culture with a high power distance, they may be seen as arrogant, aggressive, or rude, when their intentions were only to contribute to the team. Masculinity denotes how much value a culture places on traditionally male attributes (e.g., dominance, competitiveness) or female attributes (e.g., nurturing, fostering relationships). Within many sports masculinity is valued (even in women's teams). Sometimes coaches who have backgrounds in men's sports may find it challenging to coach women when competitiveness is valued, but athletes still may want to foster relationships. Uncertainty avoidance refers to how much cultures rely on well-established rules of behavior to resist change (Hofstede, 2001). Sport psychologists may face uncertainty avoidance when first working with a club or sport with strongly established traditions that do not include the development of psychological skills or communication. As with any aspect of culture, these classifications (i.e., individualistic/collectivistic, power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance) only describe tendencies and do not predict individuals’ behaviors and attitudes.

Cultural influences on personal space and time

We tend to feel uncomfortable when people crowd our personal space, yet may feel there is something wrong with us if people stay too far away. Cultural challenges may arise because the interpersonal space at which people feel comfortable can vary by more than four feet. A distance that is too close in one culture may be perceived as too far away in another. Norms for personal space also vary depending on the sport (i.e., the microculture). As consultants, we should take the lead from our clients in terms of personal space, rather than imposing our own norms onto our clients. In addition to the amount of space between client and consultant, we should also be aware of furniture arrangements and the setting. In some cultures it may be preferable to sit at an angle beside the client rather than face-to-face in one-on-one situations (Dudgeon, 2000). Meeting in an office may be uncomfortable for some (and impractical in some sporting situations). In some cultures (e.g., in Buenos Aires), seeing a psychologist is an accepted, common behavior. In other cultures (e.g., in rural areas in the United States and Australia), people may not want to be seen entering a psychologist’s office because of a feeling of shame in having to seek help.

Cultures also influence concepts of time. The two main ways to conceptualize time are clock-based and event-based. In clock-based time (adhered to in Western mainstream cultures), people organize their schedules according to the clock with appointments scheduled to begin (and often end) at particular times. Clock-based time has advantages in situations
where people are juggling meetings with different people in different places. There are, however, cultural differences in terms of clock-based time. In many Latin American cultures, schedules are made based on clock time, yet it is not unusual for the actual start time to be 30 or 45 minutes after the specified time. Arriving 30 minutes after the scheduled time is not considered as being late. In Ghana, GMT refers to Ghana Maybe Time (instead of Greenwich Mean Time); individuals can turn up an hour after an arranged time and not be late (Diehl, Hegley, & Lane, 2009).

Event-based time involves organizing a schedule using a relational strategy with the order of events established, but with no clear tie to the clock. Event-based time allows individuals to prioritize the process of a meeting and the exchange of ideas without keeping an eye on the clock, resulting in less-hurried exchanges. When we are working with people who have concepts of time that are different from our own, we need to discuss the issue openly and arrive at an agreed understanding, rather than get upset because others are late, assume lack of punctuality means a lack of interest or a lack of respect, or be confused because of others being upset by our behaviors.

Communication

To be useful consultants we need to be able to communicate effectively with the teams and athletes with whom we work (see Chapters 2 and 33). Psychological practice is reliant on communication. Just as with other behaviors and norms, aspects of communication are influenced by culture. Language is the most noticeable culturally affected component of communication. In addition to obviously different languages (e.g., English, Spanish, Mandarin), there also are differences in terminology and pronunciation in different countries or regions that speak the same language (e.g., English in Mississippi, Newfoundland, Dublin, Johannesburg, and Sydney; Spanish in Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Havana, Panama City, and Santo Domingo). Even seemingly simple words can have multiple meanings. In response to a question, “yes” may mean someone wants to be obliging and thought well of, someone has heard the question, or that someone agrees (Hanrahan, 2009).

Cultures can also differ in how information is obtained or conveyed, even if limiting the situation to one-on-one and in person. During intake interviews, psychologists may have a tendency to directly question clients, with the aim of obtaining answers to specific questions. For clients from cultures with strong oral traditions, a narrative approach that invites individuals to use their own words to tell their own stories would probably be more effective than a question-and-answer format. Although relying on hints and indirect questions may seem time consuming, this approach can sometime obtain more information than direct questioning, which can result in clients shutting down because of a feeling of being interrogated.

Many of us probably have worked with teams and have used a variety of methods to reach team consensuses about various issues (e.g., training times, uniforms, team captains, team rules and responsibilities, team cohesion). Athletes from different cultures may vary in their willingness to express firm opinions. Athletes may not respond to a comment or question, not because they don’t have an opinion, but because they feel they are not in a position to make a comment (Dudgeon, 2000). For example, athletes may not feel it is warranted to express their opinions in front of the coach, even if the coach is directly asking them a question. Some individuals may be unwilling to state their opinions in a team meeting even if the coach is not present, particularly if they perceive their views to be in conflict with the opinions of others. As consultants, we need to ensure that we do not assume that
a lack of response means a lack of interest. One way around this potentially problematic situation is to use post-it note voting (see Chapter 34) or other methods of obtaining viewpoints anonymously.

Eye contact is another component of communication whose meaning varies across cultures. Many of us were probably taught in basic counseling courses to make eye contact with clients because it shows that you are paying attention and are interested in what they have to say. In some cultures eye contact is part of being polite (e.g., the parental demand to “Look at me when I’m talking to you”). In other cultures avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect. In yet other cultures prolonged eye contact may be considered offensive, intrusive, aggressive, or even an attempt at seduction (Dudgeon, Garvey, & Pickett, 2000). The key, as with many other cultural differences, is to take our cues from our clients and/or openly discuss the issue.

### A continuum of cultural competence

Wells (2000) developed a series of six stages from cultural incompetence to cultural proficiency. The first three stages, cultural incompetence, knowledge, and awareness, make up the cognitive phase and emphasize acquiring knowledge and understanding. The final three stages, cultural sensitivity, competence, and proficiency, form the affective phase and focus on changes in attitudes and behaviors as a result of applying the knowledge obtained in the cognitive phase. Wells argued that individuals (or institutions) must actually experience working with individuals from other cultures to progress through the affective stages. See Table 48.1 for a description of the six stages.

As an individual it is difficult to develop cultural competence if working within a culturally incompetent organization. Wells (2000) would argue it is not viable for an individual to be culturally proficient within a culturally incompetent organization. It may be almost impossible to engage in culturally appropriate practices if management has rigid structures in place that do not allow for individual variations. The value of a culturally competent practitioner could be undermined by a culturally incompetent receptionist. A challenge for all of us may be to consider how we might increase the cultural competence of the organizations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Cultural incompetence</td>
<td>No knowledge of the cultural influences or implications of behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural knowledge</td>
<td>Learning the components of culture and their role in determining behavior</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cultural awareness</td>
<td>Recognizing and understanding the cultural influences and implications of behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Cultural sensitivity</td>
<td>The integration of cultural knowledge and awareness into behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural competence</td>
<td>The routine application of culturally appropriate practices and interventions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural proficiency</td>
<td>The integration of cultural competence into professional practice, teaching, and research of the individual and the organization</td>
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and institutions within which we work. Providing information about culture(s) can help with the cognitive phase of development, but the affective phase requires interactions, discussions, and experience. In some sporting clubs where cultural differences are ignored, or worse, a cause for bullying, we may be in a position to model cultural competence; reinforce instances of cultural awareness, sensitivity, or competence in others; or challenge rules, regulations, or policy that get in the way of the development of a culturally proficient organization.

**Worldviews**

We all hold worldviews, or mental representations of the world, that are developed by socialization and life experiences. Worldviews help us make sense of what we observe and what we do, providing a feeling of security due to some sense of predictability. We have a tendency to assume, unconsciously, that our worldview, or concept of reality, is the correct one. When we stay predominantly within one culture, we tend not to be aware of our worldviews because the main components are shared by those around us, and are therefore not brought into question. As Ranzijn *et al.* (2009) noted:

> Trying to describe our own worldview is like a fish trying to describe what water is: a fish could not describe water, since it is immersed in water all of the time. However, if you take a fish out of water it knows instantly what water is, since it now experiences what water is not. … Similarly, we may find it hard to describe our own worldview until it is challenged, perhaps through interacting with or encountering people with very different worldviews.

(p. 14)

Cognitively it is relatively easy to understand that others’ worldviews have as much validity and value as our own, but emotionally it may be challenging to accept the values, beliefs, and concepts of worldviews that are dramatically different from our own. Our worldviews filter how we interpret the behaviors of others. When people from different cultures attempt to understand each others’ worldviews, they do so through their own filters, making it potentially impossible to truly understand. As consultants, we need to be aware of how our own worldviews may be filtering what our clients say and the behaviors we observe. The good news is that immersing ourselves in other cultures, whether for an hour at a local community center or for months in another country, can open us to the worldviews of others (and perhaps begin to change our own). Getting to know each of our clients as individuals, with regular checks of our own assumptions, can result in a respectful relationship and be a step toward cultural competence.

**Conclusion**

Almost all of us are working, or will work, with individuals from a variety of macrocultures. All of us do work with individuals from an array of microcultures, and we should strive not only for cultural awareness, but also cultural competence (and ideally working within organizations that are culturally proficient). We need to reflect on how our own cultural backgrounds can influence how we perceive and interact with our clients. By being genuinely
interested in and interacting with individuals, we can get an idea of their worldviews and how their cultural backgrounds might influence the client–practitioner relationship. Although I recommend that sport psychologists become familiar with ethical guidelines related to culture provided by their professional organizations (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2003), reading and having a cognitive understanding of culture are only the first steps. For effective multi-cultural practice (i.e., all practice), we need to experience other cultures, reflect on our own, and learn to apply routinely the knowledge we have gained in the form of culturally appropriate practices and interventions. See Box 48.1 for the key points from this chapter.

**Box 48.1**

**Key points about culture**

- We and our clients have been molded by cultures.
- Norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors are influenced by cultures. These norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors influence how we practise psychology.
- Cultural identity is difficult to determine because many of us have been exposed to multiple macrocultures, and all of us have experienced numerous microcultures.
- Characteristics that we value may not be valued by some of our clients, because of cultural differences such as individualism/collectivism, power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance.
- Clients may differ in how they conceptualize time, the interpersonal space they find to be comfortable, and the settings in which they prefer to meet for consultations. The key is to discuss these issues openly and come to a shared understanding.
- Cultural backgrounds influence how people communicate. Language, terminology, pronunciation, questioning, stating opinions, and eye contact are just some of the facets of communication affected by culture.
- The development of cultural competence has cognitive and affective components. Cultural proficiency requires individual as well as organizational cultural competence.
- As consultants we need to be aware of how our own worldviews may filter what our clients say and the behaviors we observe.

**References**


