Working Relationships Across Diverse Communities


The authors of these two papers discuss ways of building the capacity of providers to work effectively across different cultural and ethnic communities. This is important because of inequity in the accessibility and quality of mental health services among different groups, and the disadvantages experienced by members of ethnically diverse groups\(^1\). In the first paper, Woodroffe and Spencer present a model for developing providers' knowledge and skills to improve working relationships across diverse groups. In the second paper, Hosley and colleagues discuss practical strategies learned during two successful collaborative programs providing services for Cambodian and Hmong families.

### A model for building working relationships with culturally and ethnically diverse communities

The four types of learning opportunities that Woodroffe and Spencer suggest are necessary for providers to become competent in building effective working relationships across diverse groups are summarized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities required to:</th>
<th>Goal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop a grounded knowledge base</td>
<td>Learn historical and other information about a particular group that is applicable to building social relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Build culturally competent relationships</td>
<td>Learn from about the cultural norms of different groups through experience of social interaction in a group setting, such as a focus group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss stereotypes and stereotyping</td>
<td>Increase awareness of the role of stereotypes in processing information, and the consequent biases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Form alliances with diverse communities</td>
<td>Build and maintain alliances, through spending time and effort engaging in a variety of formal and informal activities (e.g. memoranda of understanding, planning, social activities, work teams, and training).</td>
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In this model, each stage of knowledge and skill is used as a building block for further learning. This implies that the development of cultural awareness and cross-cultural skills requires a long term commitment from individual providers and from agencies, if they are to become more effective in meeting the needs of a variety of groups.

### Strategies for successful collaboration in multicultural programs

In the second paper, Hosley and colleagues identify the following elements of a successful collaboration:

- a shared commitment to the project;
- mutual respect of members;
- agreement that all members bring important knowledge to the process;
- a belief that their partnership benefits their own organizations and program users;
- strong leaders skilled in communication and in leading groups; and

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While these elements could apply to any collaboration, the authors suggest that additional strategies specific to multicultural collaborations are required. They recommend that collaborators:

- Actively recruit partners;
- Ensure that the composition of the team is representative of the community and that partners share similar objectives;
- Accommodate partners’ preferences and needs through scheduling, and rotating meeting locations;
- Compensate partners for non-work time spent on the program;
- Take steps to overcome language and other barriers by involving translators, and bilingual and bicultural staff as credible bridges across communities;
- Avoid overloading team members that already have multiple roles;
- Provide the support, such as child care and transportation, that allows families to participate;
- Use a facilitator skilled in engaging group members with a variety of styles;
- Adapt the meeting to accommodate cultural differences and to promote participation by all the members of the group, for example by taking additional time to build relationships, communicating outside of formal meetings, and adapting methods of decision making; and
- Provide leadership training.

It is clear that, similar to developing cross-cultural knowledge and skills among providers, multicultural collaborations require time, effort, and commitment. Even when participants are skilled and committed, conflict may occur at different levels of the system, for example between program funders and participants. If changes are made to an existing program to accommodate different cultural groups, program sponsors may perceive this as a threat to the fidelity of the program. Procedures for resolving such conflicts will be required. Other challenges may arise when team membership changes and relationships are lost due to staff turnover.

Working effectively across cultural and ethnically diverse communities continues to be a challenge for many providers. However, existing disparities in mental health outcomes cannot be addressed without developing the capacity of providers to meet the needs of diverse groups.

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