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Cross-Cultural Considerations in Counseling Clients of Samoan Heritage

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The Samoan islands have been politically, economically, and culturally influenced by the United States and Western European nations for more than one hundred and fifty years. Divided into two political regions, American Samoa is a protectorate of the United States and Western Samoa is an independent nation. Due to its political status and more direct influence from the United States, American Samoa is, in many aspects, a more modernized region compared to its neighbor Western Samoa. In the past half century, many Samoans have migrated to Hawaii and the west coast of the United States, including a significant population to the State of Utah. Tradition, migration, religion, acculturation, and modernization of Samoans make them a unique immigrant group. This article discusses some traditional aspects of Samoan culture including a short history of European and American influences, migration of Samoans to the United States, and treatment implications for therapists working with Samoan clients.

The islands of Samoa are located approximately 800 miles south of the equator and 1700 miles north of New Zealand. Apia, the capitol of Western Samoa, is 2600 miles southwest of Hawaii, with the neighboring islands of Western Samoa lying 40 miles to the west (Murphy & McGarvey, 1994). Western Samoa consists of the islands Savai'i, Upolu, Manono, and

Apolima (Webb, 1996). The nine islands which comprise Samoa are contrasting places. Currently, the nations of American Samoa and Western Samoa are divided into two political regions: American Samoa, which is a relatively modernized society; and Western Samoa, an independent nation which holds more traditional and agrarian standards of living.

Migration for economic and religious reasons has brought many Samoans to the United States. Given the unique culture of Samoa and the factors influencing migration, working with clients of Samoan heritage presents some unique challenges for psychologists, counselors, and other mental health professionals.

Traditional Samoan culture has been changed by contact with European and American cultures. This

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contact with western European institutions has influenced how Samoans view the world. Many Samoans maintain traditional Samoan values, beliefs, and social institutions; some have adopted western views and lifestyles; and others attempt to maintain a balance between the traditional Samoan way of life and the "modern" lifestyle of American and Western European societies. Additionally, as was true with other cultural and ethnic groups preceding them, migration to the United States has influenced the attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of many Samoan families, particularly the younger Samoans who have had limited contact with the culture of the Samoan Islands.

WESTERN INFLUENCES IN THE SAMOAN ISLANDS

The Samoans knew of Europeans before their arrival to the islands in the 18th century. Samoans would trade with the islands of Fiji and Tonga for European goods. About 1643, it is documented that Samoans traded for and acquired blue glass beads from the Fiji and Tongan Islanders that had been acquired from European traders (Kramer, 1995). Thus, even before the arrival of Europeans to the Samoan Islands, Samoan society was impacted by the arrival of European trade goods, via Fiji and Tonga, in the mid-17th century. For over 350 years, then, trade has brought European and American culture influences into the lives of the Samoan people.

Several western nations have governed the islands of Western Samoa since the 18th century. After a period of political uncertainty, Germany ruled Samoa from 1899 to 1914, establishing plantations and shipping industries. New Zealand ruled the region after the end of the first World War. Western Samoa became a United Nations Trusteeship in 1945 (Webb, 1996).

During the 19th century Samoa saw the arrival of Christian missionaries. These missionaries were sent to create settlements and build churches. Later that century, Germans, English, and Americans came to develop a colonial economy in Samoa. Many traveled to Samoa on business or to escape from the harsh cold of the winter months. However, American Samoa was under the peoples' control until 1860; the German, English, and American governments jointly administered between 1889 and 1899, then the United States was granted American Samoa as a territory by treaty in 1899. The islands of Tutuila, Olosega, Ofu, Ta'u,

Aunu'u, Rose, and Swain currently make up American Samoa (Webb, 1996).

Western Samoa became an independent nation in 1962. Western Samoa has maintained a cultural and political lifestyle referred to as *the Samoan way*. The Samoan way has dominated Western Samoa's social and political institutions since independence. The Samoan way is characterized by close family ties and hierarchical ruling of extended family heads, or *Matai*. Until 1990 only *Matai* could vote in Western Samoa. Viewed from a Western perspective, Western Samoa has been through 30 years of misgovernment and corruption. *Matai* occupy 41 of 44 seats of the government (the other three seats are reserved for non-Samoans). Traditionally, the wealthiest (but not necessarily the most qualified) *Matai* have been elected to office. Recently adopted suffrage laws now in place arouse hopes among many Samoans that education and infrastructure will improve (The Samoan Way, 1993). The desire for goods from the United States has led to a substantial trade imbalance in Western Samoa. This demand has been created by media advertisement for goods with the encouragement and support of the American Samoan government (Chin-Hong & McGarvey, 1996). The United States continues to exert a major influence in the creation of a more modernized society in Samoa. The United States government and commercial tuna carriers are the main employers in the Samoan Islands.

TRADITIONAL SAMOAN CULTURE

The extended family is the most important social unit in traditional Samoan culture. The traditional Samoan extended family is a communal living unit. Traditionally, the Samoan family is organized into a very identifiable extended family hierarchy. The *Matai* are the paramount leaders of the extended family (known as the '*agia*') and are elected by a consensus of extended family members. The *Matai* have control over the labor and resources of the '*agia*'. Until recently, the *Matai* assigned work in the agricultural fields and allocated food to individual families of the '*agia*'. However, recent modernization has to some degree changed this traditional system of resource collection and allocation, weakening the traditional role and power of the *Matai*. However, in many respects, the *Matai* retain a central

and powerful role in all aspects of the Samoan family. Unmarried and recently married members of the *'agia* will give up most of their paychecks to the *Matai* as a replacement for traditional family labor. Subsistence allowances are then returned to members of the extended family (Chin-Hong & McGarvey, 1996).

Ceremonies have always been an important part of the Samoan culture. *Fa'alavelave* is the traditional system of Samoan ceremonial exchanges at key life events (such as funerals, weddings, birthdays, etc.). At these ceremonies, large public gift exchanges occur between hosts and guests. Some aspects of these ceremonies have evolved as a result of modernization, but their central role in Samoan culture remains. For example, villagers in Western Samoa have learned that hosting a *fa'alavelave* ceremony generates income and creates a profit. Visitors are now giving more than they receive and village hosts use this to enhance their wealth and prestige. Gift exchanges with younger members of the *'agia* have become asymmetrical (Chin-Hong & McGarvey, 1996). As a consequence, if you receive little capital from the *Matai* you will not be able to afford expensive gifts in return for gifts you receive from higher ranking members of other *'agia*.

Traditional Samoan culture is very much a community oriented society. Samoan values revolve around how well people play out their assigned roles in society. Individualism, or *loto* (an emphasis on personal desires characterized by feeling, thinking, and willfulness), is devalued in Samoan culture. However, Samoans may have many different roles, or *aga*, to play out. As such, it is no surprise that there are many ways to verbally express the role a person plays in the Samoan language. However, individual experience(s) are noted by the singular word, *loto*. The moral discourse of a Samoan is that one should play out one's assigned role in the group, acting according to one's status or rank. Living according to one's status shows proper respect to the community and is the very core of the Samoan way of life. Showing appropriate respect is one of the most important values in the Samoan community. This value of respect would compel persons of lower status to "hold their tongues" even if they knew a person of higher status was wrong (Mageo, 1995).

Discipline is done in a framework of establishing respect and family loyalty rather than personal emotions. For example, in traditional Samoan society,

when a man committed adultery, it would not be uncommon for the wife and her sisters to pursue the offending female, beat her and cut off an ear. This would not be done so much out of individual jealousy on the part of the wife, but to ensure that the adulterous relationship would not diminish respect for the family in the eyes of the larger community (Mageo, 1995).

Similarly, Samoan children are expected to show respect along the lines of relationship hierarchies, especially when adults are around. Children's behavior is controlled in relationship to the body and space of the environment. Considering that space is a metaphor for societal position, a Samoan parent may use the command to sit as a method to control a child's behavior, placing them in a proper societal position. This technique may or may not be used when a child is in the presence of other adults (Durante, 1997). The use of the body and its relation to space places the child into his/her proper roles. Unlike the predominant appreciation of individualism found among many Americans, individual motivations for behavior are discouraged in traditional Samoan culture.

MIGRATION AND ACCULTURATION

There have been several major migrations of Samoan people in the past one hundred years. Significant numbers of Samoans have migrated to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, Utah, and the west coast of the United States.

A significant motivation for immigration to Utah appears to be based on religious beliefs. Approximately one-third of Samoans migrating to Utah are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There is a generally held belief among many members of the LDS Church that Samoan ancestry is linked to one of the "lost tribes" of Israel (Cowley, 1954; Smith, 1954; see Alma 63:5-8), a belief which has prompted many Samoans to migrate to Utah to join other members of the Church in "Zion" (Hamilton, 1996).

As with many other immigrant groups, Samoan families have faced the challenge of retaining traditional beliefs and values in the context of a new society which often presents conflicting beliefs and values. Conflicting cultural beliefs and the lack a singular set of societal norms have led to a sense of cultural alienation among

many children of immigrant groups. This phenomenon of cultural alienation is certainly evident among many children and adolescents of Samoan parentage living in the United States.

PROBLEMS OF CULTURAL ASSIMILATION

The problem of cultural alienation is evident among the Samoans and other cultural groups from the Pacific Island region. Alienation is considered a primary reason for the formation of youth gangs such as the *Tongan Crips* and *Sons of Samoa*. It is estimated that approximately 10% of all gang members in Salt Lake City are Polynesian (Hamilton, 1996). While the overall crime rate in Salt Lake City has not increased, crimes have become more violent – a phenomenon largely attributed to increased gang activities in recent years.

Another concern is the LDS Church's policy of establishing "Polynesian only" congregations, a move which has been criticized as creating a sense of isolation and exacerbating the sense of social alienation among church members (Hamilton, 1996). While the Church does not see any link between increased gang violence in Utah and its congregational policies, it has begun an extensive outreach program for Polynesian youth and parents (Hamilton, 1996).

Evidence of cultural alienation among Polynesian youth does not appear limited to Utah. In Los Angeles, Samoan and Tongan youth gangs are carrying out the rivalries of their ancestry. Again, alienation appears to be an influential factor in Samoan youths' participation in gang activity. Children get caught between parents who cling to traditional culture and the process of belonging to a new culture (Kahn & Fua, 1995). For example, Kahn & Fua (1995) found that certain types of Samoan migrant families in Australia produce adolescents who are socially delinquent. The problems noted among these families have included economic stress, corporal punishment as primary means of child discipline, less talking and reasoning with children, less traditional practices, and less interest in church affiliation and religious activities.

Kahn & Fua (1995) found further evidence of cultural alienation in the fact that, compared to non-Samoan and non-Tongan youth, Samoan and Tongan delinquent youth had lower self-esteem, higher scores on the alienation scale, were uncertain about future education and

career goals, and had less affiliation with churches.

While violent and delinquent behavior is certainly not evident among all or even most Samoan youth, its frequency is such that the phenomenon of cultural alienation should be considered when working with Samoan families and youth.

CONCLUSIONS AND TREATMENT SUGGESTIONS

A number of researchers have recognized the potential impact upon the therapeutic process when notable cultural differences exist between the therapist and client (Ibrahim, 1991; McGill, 1992; Pedersen, 1991; Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992). Familiarity with differences of world view in general and cultural differences in particular allow the therapist to co-create with the client an awareness of the therapeutic relationship which offers the best possibility for successful outcome (Becvar, Canfield & Becvar, 1997). While this understanding of cultural differences applies to all therapeutic relationships, due to the notable cultural differences which often exist between Samoans and non-Samoans, an understanding of such differences becomes essential when working with clients within the Samoan community.

An important consideration in therapeutic work with Samoan clients is to avoid grouping them into the larger group of "Polynesian." Because there are many unique cultures identified as "Polynesian," the label is so general that it is of little practical value when referring to Samoans. Unfortunately Hawaiians, Tongans, New Zealanders, Fijians, and Samoans are often lumped into this broad category. This common mistake would be similar to referring to the English, French, Germans, and Russians as one people under the label "European"; or referring to the Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Chinese as one people under the label "Asian."

As a result of cultural uniqueness, there is no single theory or treatment procedure ideally suited for clinical work with every Polynesian family. Even among Samoans, there is significant cultural diversity between the people of American Samoa and those of Western Samoa. Consequently, there are notable differences between these two main Samoan groups and the problems they encounter in the process of cultural assimilation. Given this understanding, there is a very real possibility that two Samoan families living in Salt Lake

City, while sharing many cultural similarities (such as language), would be very different from one another in other important respects. One family might identify with a rural agrarian lifestyle similar to the one they previously experienced in Western Samoa, while the other family from American Samoa would be accustomed to a more urbanized and modern environment. As such, it would be useful for a therapist to avoid prejudging families. Questions should be posed which help identify the unique cultural context of each family.

Because concepts of *counseling* and *therapy* – as known in the United States – do not exist in traditional Samoan society, client-centered therapy is often most useful when working with Samoan clients. Other useful questions and areas to address include:

- Where does the client or family stand regarding traditional Samoan cultural values?
- What are the specific values, beliefs, and expectations of this particular client?
- Where is the family presently located and from where did they immigrate?
- How long has the client been in the current setting?
- What role has modernization played in the current family system?
- Is there evidence of alienation among any members in the family?

Noting that Samoans are traditionally a collectivist culture, Afele-Fa'amuli (1993, p. 4137) provided evidence that "in this predominately oral culture, acquisition of non-indigenous knowledge and skills was more effective when demonstration, discussion, lecture, and other creative techniques were used in combination." Additionally, collective or community learning appears better suited to individual learning. Rather than relying upon individual therapy, this insight into the collective aspects of Samoan society supports the use of family therapy, extended family therapy or multiple family group therapy as preferred treatment modalities (Afele-Fa'amuli, 1993).

Awareness of and avoidance of cultural biases in theoretical foundations of therapy would appear to be particularly important when working with Samoan clients. For example, Salvador Minuchin's *structural* theory (Minuchin, 1974) or Murray Bowen's theory of *enmeshment* (Bowen, 1971) might not be very useful theoretical models for understanding the extended Samoan family systems in certain contexts. Similarly, in applying the concept of *family developmental stages* (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989) it may look as if Samoan families never *launch* their children.

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