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Culturally Sensitive Social Work and Mental Health Practice with the Amish

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Honors Research Project

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Abstract

With the growing number of Amish in the United States today, it is important for social workers and mental health practitioners serving this population to do so in a way that is sensitive to their culture. Even though the Amish live a unique, simplistic lifestyle which enables them to focus on the things which they value such as church membership and family, occasionally, they do have mental health and social service needs. This study attempts to explore specific culturally sensitive behaviors which social workers and mental health practitioners can utilize in striving to meet these needs. The researcher compiled a simple questionnaire, containing ten questions derived from the insights of counselors and social workers who work with or supervise workers who work with the Amish. The researcher then went door to door and conducted face-to-face interviews with members of Holmes County Ohio's Amish community utilizing this questionnaire. After the data was collected, SPSS was utilized to analyze content. The findings of the project indicate that actions such as practitioners expressing their respect and acceptance for the Amish population's choices to be highly significant in fostering a positive helping relationship with this population. The implications of this study and recommendations for future research are also provided.

Introduction

In recent years, the United States (U.S.) Amish population has experienced significant growth. The actual numbers suggest that this group's size has doubled in the past twenty years. This population growth is largely due to the facts that Amish families are relatively large with an average of five or more children per family and also because about eighty-five percent of Amish youth join the Amish church ("Amish Studies," 2014). This population has spread throughout thirty states and Canada (Diebel, 2014). However, the largest Amish population in the world is found in Holmes County, Ohio where approximately eighteen thousand of the county's estimated forty-three thousand, six hundred residents are Amish ("Experience Holmes County Ohio," 2014; "State & County," 2013). Since the Amish population comprises over forty percent of Holmes County's population, it is important that social workers and mental health practitioners who serve them do this in a culturally sensitive manner. The goal of this study is to explore specific behaviors which may constitute as culturally sensitive practice with the Amish.

Brief History of the Amish

In order get a richer context of any culture, it may be advantageous to look at the history of the population to get a sense of their heritage and what events/occurrences have shaped them as a people. Thus follows a brief history of the Amish population. Their history goes back to the early fifteen hundreds about the time Martin Luther hung his *Ninety Five Theses* on the German church door. Around this time there was a Swiss reformer named Huldrych Zwingli who began preaching doctrine in the city of Zurich which clashed with the teaching of the Catholic church (Nolt, 2003). Zwingli's teachings attracted radical youths who took the literal teachings of the Bible to a whole new level than Zwingli himself (Nolt, 2003). One of the predominant issues these dissenters had against the Catholic church was the baptism of infants. They believed that one should be baptized only after he/she is old enough to understand the implications of the act in which he/she was participating. In defiance against

the City Counsel, these radicals started to baptize one another as adults; hence they were daubed Anabaptists (Nolt, 2003).

Because of their radical beliefs, these Anabaptists were severely persecuted in the years to follow. Jailing, torturing, burning, beheading, and selling them as slaves were all used as attempts to eliminate this movement. As a result, the Anabaptists often held their meetings in secret. This period of persecution left its scars on the Anabaptist movement (Nolt, 2003). Nolt (2013) says, “The re-baptizers developed a deep distrust of larger society and a fairly negative view of government...” (p. 13).

Despite this severe opposition, the Anabaptists' faith survived and eventually, due to the influence of Menno Simons, some were called Mennonites. However, around the sixteen eighties a man named Jakob Ammann began to make reforms among the Swiss Mennonite communities. Because of strong disagreements, Ammann and his followers broke away from the Mennonites, and eventually were called Amish (Nolt, 2003). According to Daly (2012), members of this sect started migrating to America because of persecution and discrimination against them by the government. The first significant voyage occurred around seventeen thirty-seven and carried twenty-one Amish families (Nolt, 2003). Initially, this population settled in Pennsylvania (Robinson, 2012), but presently they have spread throughout the U. S. and Ontario (“Amish Studies,” 2014).

No doubt there is much more to Amish history besides these details. However, social workers and mental health practitioners should note the resiliency of this people; that they should become what they are today even though they suffered severely for what they believed. Throughout the years, they have preserved their beliefs and maintained their unique lifestyle of separation from the world as many shun modern conveniences such as owning/driving vehicles, having electricity/electronics, and media usage within their homes with the exception of printed media. Today, they remain a close-knit culture who focus on maintaining family and community values such as hard work, humility, and simplicity (Weyer et al., 2014).

The Amish: A Rural People

Another concept which may add context to the exploration of culturally sensitive practice with the Amish is the idea that the Amish, being identified as a rural subgroup (Riebschleger, 2012), exemplify many sociocultural characteristics/values commonly found in rural populations. The first rural value which is characteristic of the Amish is attachment to the land (Daley, 2015). Many Amish homesteads have several houses (Kraybill, 2001). One is a large house where typically the family is raised. Since large families are common among the Amish, these houses are usually fairly sizable. The second house which is smaller is called the “Dawdi” house. This term means Grandpa in Pennsylvania Dutch, the language commonly spoken by Amish. Eventually, after the children have grown and married, the parents of the family will move into the “Dawdi” house, and one of the married children will move into the big house to raise his/her own family (Hurst & McConnell, 2010). Of course not every Amish family follows this living scenario, but it is fairly typical within the Amish of Holmes County. This example, however, shows the Amish's attachment to the land in that sometimes land can stay within families for generations.

The importance of church and family is a second value often found in rural communities (Daley, 2015) which many Amish hold dear. If one looks at an Amish community, many times it is apparent that they are a communal people. It is common for families or at least parts of families to live close to one another (Kraybill, 2001; Hurst & McConnell, 2010) and attend the same church. Family gatherings and reunions are often important among the Amish. There is a sense of connectedness derived from one's ancestry/lineage and standing in the family.

As a member of the Amish community, one's identity is also somewhat formed by one's standing in the church (Hurst & McConnell, 2010). Consequently not only are the church and family important social institutions in the Amish community, but these entities actually have the potential to dictate one's life. As Kraybill states, “The church district is the social and ceremonial unit of the Amish

world” (1989, p. 92). For many people outside the Amish culture, church and sometimes family are elements merely incorporated into one's life, but many Amish's lives actually revolve and exist around their churches and families. As a communal people, they manifest their dedication by yielding self-interest for the sake of the community (Kraybill, 2001). Because this valuing of church and family is often found in rural communities (Daley, 2015), these characteristics are conspicuous examples of why the Amish are considered rural.

The prominence and importance of informal helping networks and closeness to the community are two other rural characteristics (Daley, 2015) which are fundamental to the Amish way of life. Because of the closeness of Amish communities, many of the social needs that arise are handled by informal helping networks (Lee, 1984), such as the church. From stereotypical barn raisings to benefit breakfasts supporting their parochial schools to having auctions to raise support for Amish children born with birth defects (Mohr, 2013) the Amish are very good at taking care of their own people.

Reliance on tradition and self-reliance, both traits typical to rural communities (Daley, 2015), are characteristics of the Amish as well. By observing their dress and the way they live their lives free from many worldly vices it can be seen that this people values tradition. Although the Amish are not unaffected by change (Hurst & McConnell, 2010), since they live in a changing world, it can still be said that Amish traditions are maintained and significant to their culture.

Along with tradition, self-reliance is also a trait of the Amish. The fact that these people do not rely on the government to meet their needs (Lee, 1984) is one indicator of their individualism. In a study among the Old Order Amish, the ability to be able to work hard was a theme expressed to define health by all three generations of the study's participants (Reed et al, 2012). The hard working, rugged individualism of the Amish plays into the rural value of self-reliance (Daley, 2015).

Research Design and Methodology

These sociocultural characteristics distinguishing the Amish as a rural people and the

population's history add a contextual backdrop for the basis of this study exploring culturally sensitive social work and mental health practice with the Amish. The research design chosen for the study was a mixed method design in which the researcher performed face-to-face interviews with members of Holmes County's Amish community. In preparation for creating the study's assessment instrument, a ten item questionnaire, the researcher consulted with two professional counselors and three social workers all of which were experienced in serving the Amish population. These professionals gave different insights on specific behaviors which they have found useful in working with this population. The researcher then created a questionnaire based on the responses from these professionals. Another preparatory step taken by the researcher included creating an informed consent form, which was approved by the University of Akron's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB).

After the questionnaire was created and IRB approval was granted, the researcher conducted twenty face-to-face surveys in the participants' homes utilizing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was a five-point Likert Scale (1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree). There were also three optional questions on the back of the questionnaire to which some of the participants responded. These questions regarded actions a social worker/counselor could take which would make participants want to return for services or would offend them, and it also inquired if there was anything the participants wanted to add to this study.

Results

In completing the study, the researcher interviewed twenty Amish adults who were residents of Holmes County. These interviews were conducted in the privacy of the participants' homes to ensure confidentiality and to support the comfort levels of participants as they voluntarily completed the questionnaires. Participant gender and age (they needed to be over eighteen) were not variables.

Table 1. *Mean and St. Deviation Per Questionnaire Item*

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors telling me a little about their own lives when providing services.	1.85	0.489
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors shaking my hand when introducing themselves.	2.40	0.598
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors asking me what my church leaders would think when making decisions.	2.25	0.910
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors teaching the benefits of emotions when providing services.	2.00	0.725
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors showing interest in my ancestry/ lineage when providing services.	2.20	0.696
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors who use a sense of humor when providing services.	2.10	0.968
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors explaining confidentiality and boundaries regarding what I say to him or her.	1.50	0.607
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors acknowledging that even though their own personal beliefs may be different than mine, they respect and accept my choices.	1.40	0.503
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors asking me what my spouse or other family members would think when making decisions.	1.80	0.616
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors admitting when they don't understand something about my culture and asking questions about my culture while providing services.	1.85	0.587

Table 2. Frequency and Percent Per Questionnaire Item

Items	F	%
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors telling me a little about their own lives when providing services.	Strongly Agree = 4 Agree = 15 Neutral = 1 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 20.0 Agree = 75.0 Neutral = 5.0 Disagree = 0.0 Strongly Disagree = 0.0
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors shaking my hand when introducing themselves.	Strongly Agree = 1 Agree = 10 Neutral = 9 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 5.0 Agree = 50.0 Neutral = 45.0 Disagree = 0.0 Strongly Disagree = 0.0
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors asking me what my church leaders would think when making decisions.	Strongly Agree = 4 Agree = 9 Neutral = 5 Disagree = 2 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 20.0 Agree = 45.0 Neutral = 25.0 Disagree = 10.0 Strongly Disagree = 0
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors teaching the benefits of emotions when providing services.	Strongly Agree = 5 Agree = 10 Neutral = 5 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 25.0 Agree = 50.0 Neutral = 25.0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors showing interest in my ancestry/ lineage when providing services.	Strongly Agree = 3 Agree = 10 Neutral = 7 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 15.0 Agree = 50.0 Neutral = 35.0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors who use a sense of humor when providing services.	Strongly Agree = 6 Agree = 8 Neutral = 4 Disagree = 2 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 30.0 Agree = 40.0 Neutral = 20.0 Disagree = 10.0 Strongly Disagree = 0
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors explaining confidentiality and boundaries regarding what I say to him or her.	Strongly Agree = 11 Agree = 8 Neutral = 1 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 55.0 Agree = 40.0 Neutral = 5.0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors acknowledging that even though their own personal beliefs may be different than mine, they respect and accept my choices.	Strongly Agree = 12 Agree = 8 Neutral = 0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 60.0 Agree = 40.0 Neutral = 0.0 Disagree = 0.0 Strongly Disagree = 0.0
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors asking me what my spouse or other family members would think when making decisions.	Strongly Agree = 6 Agree = 12 Neutral = 2 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 30.0 Agree = 60.0 Neutral = 10.0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors admitting when they don't understand something about my culture and asking questions about my culture while providing services.	Strongly Agree = 5 Agree = 13 Neutral = 2 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 25.0 Agree = 65.0 Neutral = 10.0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0

A few of the participants contributed in answering the optional questions on the back of the questionnaire. Genuineness, making clients feel cared for, practitioners making themselves at home when providing in-home services, and practitioners speaking Pennsylvania Dutch while providing services were responses given to the question “Are there any additional things that a social worker/counselor might do that would make you feel comfortable and want to return for services?” Responses to the question, “Are there approaches or things that a social worker/mental health worker might do when working with you or your family which would be offensive?” included trying to persuade someone to act against their beliefs, using a sense of humor when not appropriate, practitioners not listening to the individuals who are trying to help the client cope, and breaking confidentiality. There were no responses given to the question, “Is there any additional information you would like to add which would be useful to this research?” All of these responses constitute as themes toward the qualitative portion of the study.

Discussion

Several significant factors emerged in the results of this survey. The most significant survey item was “I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors acknowledging that even though their own personal beliefs may be different than mine, they respect and accept my choices” ($M=1.40$). Sixty percent of participants said that they strongly agreed with this statement. Interestingly enough the least significant item on the survey was “I appreciate or would appreciate social workers/counselors shaking my hand when introducing themselves” ($M=2.40$) as only one ($F=1$) participant said they strongly agree with this statement and nine ($F=9$) admitted they were neutral.

Since strongly disagree and perhaps even disagree may be seen as strong statements for a population known for its passivity, the researcher is proposing that neutral responses may be more significant in implying practice behaviors which do not necessarily enhance culturally sensitive practice with the Amish. It is not believed that behaviors with neutral responses harm the helping

relationship, but they don't necessarily foster excessive practitioner/client rapport. It can be noted that responses to the statement regarding practitioners using a sense of humor when providing services was widely distributed with thirty percent (%=30) strongly agreeing, forty percent (%=40) agreeing, twenty percent (%=20) neutral, and ten percent (%=10) disagreeing. There was also a wide distribution in responses to the statement regarding asking clients what their church leaders would think when making decisions with twenty percent (%=20) strongly agreeing, forty-five percent (%=45) agreeing, twenty-five percent (%=25) neutral, ten percent (%=10) disagreeing. This variety in responses suggests that practitioners using a sense of humor and regarding the opinions of the client's church leaders is subjective to each situation as every client is different. It is the practitioner's responsibility as the professional to decide if these actions are appropriate with his/her clients.

Limitations

This study has several limitations which should be discussed. The first significant limitation is the small sample size. There were only twenty individuals who participated in the study which limits the ability to generalize the results. Another limitation is the fact that all of the study's participants were living in central Holmes County. This limits the representativeness and generalization of the study because there are approximately two hundred thirty-eight church districts in Greater Holmes County (Donnermeyer & Luthy, 2013.) with varying degrees of beliefs and standards. Also, the history and life experiences of each participant likely affected their responses to the questionnaire statements making the study highly subjective. A threat to internal validity might be the testing instrument used. As a result of the researcher devising the questionnaire, this instrument has not been proven valid or reliable.

Implications and Recommendations

All of the responses to this survey were fairly favorable of practitioners using these techniques which suggests that these behaviors contribute to culturally sensitive practice with the Amish. The lowest mean score (M=2.40) being closer to Agree (Agree=2) than to Neutral (Neutral=3). However,

some of the techniques such as expressing respect and acceptance of the client's choices and explaining confidentiality and boundaries were definitely more significant than some of the other questionnaire statements. As a result, a possible future study could compare clients' impressions of practitioners who utilized expressing respect and acceptance of the clients' choices and explained confidentiality and boundaries with clients' impression of practitioners who did not employ these techniques. This study could include include other significant items from the questionnaire as well. It could be hypothesized that utilizing these techniques will enhance the clients' impressions of the practitioners.

Also, it is suggested that a similar study be completed with a larger sample size in a variety of different areas inhabited by the Amish in order to get a broader, less subjective view of different behaviors which might culturally engage the population. On a larger scale, completing similar studies to this which utilize a simple questionnaire in other rural areas with different rural populations could enhance rural social work and mental health practices on a national level. It is suggested that further research such as this should be completed.

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