SAGE reference

Encyclopedia of Human Services and Diversity

Isolated Communities and Cultural Competence

The definitions of isolated community vary significantly due to differences in local governments, humanitarian agencies', and international organizations' policies and objectives in categorizing certain groups of people or communities as isolated communities. In general, isolated communities may be a result of the geographical location of the community (e.g., mountain terrains or distant and small islands), the lack of social infrastructure (e.g., transportation, electricity, and telecommunications), their demographic composition, and the historical, religious, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds of the region or community. Isolated communities can vary in their degrees of isolation and can exist in underdeveloped regions as well as developed countries. For example, as of 2007, Brazil's National Foundation of the Indian (FUNAI) has documented 67 uncontacted tribes that live in isolation from the rest of the modern world. In Canada, there are fly-in communities that have scheduled flights and telephone services but rely solely on bush aviation to connect to the outside world.

Communities can become isolated through unintentional or purposeful separation. For example, geographical disparities can significantly impact communities' access to government infrastructure or health care. On the other hand, resistance to other cultures may encourage certain communities to voluntarily hide or withdraw from the outside world, resulting in cultural inclusivity. For example, the Amish in the United States form isolated faith communities, reject the use of most modern technology (e.g., automobiles and electricity), and wear distinctively conservative clothing.

Some communities choose to avoid or resist further contact with outsiders due to tragic or unpleasant experiences in the past. Many Indian tribes in the Amazon rainforest in Brazil remain secluded from the outside world but currently face extinction from land loss and disease. The Brazilian government has established policies to prohibit contact with these tribes, with the exception of a few selected workers from FUNAI, to prevent the invasion of their land and to preserve their autonomy.

Impacts of Globalization and Modernization

Many isolated communities have their own histories, cultures, social structures and institutions, modes of social interactions, and languages. Some isolated communities have existed as a cloister for thousands of years, similar to the ancient people of Brazil and Venezuela who have been separate populations for about 2,000 years. ToDay, isolated communities are up against the influences of the impeding outside world due to globalization and modernization that may challenge their sustainability and destabilize their indigenous cultures. Foreign investments, modern industries, tourism, and technological and ecological changes have all threatened the survival of isolated communities' cultures, ways of life, and territories.

While outsiders may believe that changes will bring prosperity and development to isolated communities, the "progress" often comes at a price of transforming, reducing, and even rejecting local beliefs, traditions, and cultural values, which are essential to the identities and survival of these communities. Promoting and acknowledging the presence of isolated communities and their cultural differences in the modern world requires behaviors, attitudes, and policies that suit the isolated communities' situations.

Bridging Cultural Gaps

Culture is a system of shared meanings. Culture can be expressed in various ways such as customs, rituals, food, religious practices, or taboos. It is transmitted from generation to generation through Many different ways such as languages, performances, plays, and art. Culture provides a way of thinking and interacting and generally involves specific customs, worldviews, ideas, values, methods of communication, and behavior. Cultural groups are shaped by, among others, race, ethnicity, religion, language, region, gender, sexual orientation, and background.

Cultural diversity brings together positive and negative influences of a society. On one hand, it creates a colorful and vibrant community that allows an exchange of cultural products and lifestyles. On the other hand, it creates fragmentation and conflict, which can evolve into discrimination, oppression, and violence.

The literature suggests that diversity is never problematic in and of itself. It is individual and institutional responses to diversity that can be problematic. The challenge of toDay's cross-cultural interactions lies within individuals and group behaviors that hinder the ability to promote equality and equity among different groups, resulting in prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping. Cultural competence in this context requires a complex processing and understanding of other cultures' values, worldviews, and practices, which are attributable to a variety of factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, and sociopolitical contexts, among others).

Serving Isolated Communities

Any policy or effort aimed at strengthening and empowering isolated communities needs to be conducted with cultural sensitivity. Miscommunication may occur when one party views their actions as offering a solution to poverty condition or opening up access for the flow of resources, while the other party views this action as a form of invasion on their beliefs, values, and traditions. From this perspective, cultural competence requires one to understand cultural differences in normative practices and worldviews, employ cross-cultural knowledge and skills, and honor and celebrate cultural diversity.

Addressing the needs of isolated communities through community engagement and participatory action requires careful attention to avoid problematic social control over isolated or disadvantaged groups. Community-based action has the potential to encourage and motivate community members to actively participate in the process of change. by incorporating local, direct involvement and interactive communication, individuals from the outside world can avoid miscommunication and maintain effective, meaningful interactions with community members.

Dyah Pitaloka &
Elaine Hsieh, University of Oklahoma
http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346663.n320
See Also:

- Community-Based Services
- Cross-Cultural Knowledge
- Cross-Cultural Skills
- Empowerment Research
- Ethnic Diversity and Values
- Service Providers and Cultural Diversity

Further Readings

Crate, Susan A.Cows, Kin and Globalization: An Ethnography of Sustainability.Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2006.
Debebe, Gelaye.Navigating Power: Cross-Cultural Competence in Navajoland.Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012.
Hancock, Tina U."Cultural Competence in the Assessment of Poor Mexican Families in the Rural Southeastern United States."Child Welfare, v. 84/5 (2005).
University of California Davis Center for Reducing Health Disparities.Building Partnerships: Conversation With the Hmong About Mental Health Needs and Community Strengths, Author, 2009.