

Walking Two Worlds: Integrating Traditional Healing Into Western Treatment

Ziyu Liu, Mario Soto, and Rachel Ocampo Hoogasian

Counseling and Applied Psychology~ Arizona State University

Rachel.Ocampo.Hoogasian@asu.edu

Abstract

The ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014) states that competent counselors "gain knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, disposition, and skills pertinent to being a culturally competent counselor in working with a diverse client population." (p. 8). This qualitative study focuses on the experiences of medical personnel and behavioral health professionals integrating traditional medicine into their work within the healthcare industry and/or academia. They discuss their personal path to utilizing integrative medicine, the challenges they face within this integration as well as their roles, expectations, and boundaries in the process. Participants' stories, shed light on the ways treatment providers offer culturally accessible and acceptable care to diverse clients. This research provides valuable insights into integrating ancestral wisdom from indigenous cultures to improve upon and expand Western therapeutic practice.

Literature

- According to Salazar and Levin (2013), "Curanderismo is an integral part of Mexican American culture, encompassing religious, spiritual, and health related beliefs and rituals."
- Curanderismo is a type of holistic folk medicine traditionally used in Mexican and Mexican American cultures. Followers of this healing system define disease as having both biological and spiritual causes and, therefore, utilize curandero/as who treat on three levels—material, spiritual, and mental (Texas State Historical Association, 2015).
- Hoogasian and Lijtmaer (2010) stated that Western providers "working with clients who participate in Indigenous healing systems, like Curanderismo (Mexican traditional healing) presents Western therapists with heightened levels of uneasiness" because they may feel ill equipped to meet these clients' needs (p. 297).
- Latinx peoples that hold worldviews consistent with Curanderismo believe that the mind, body, and spirit are inseparable, thus, treatment that separates the two would not be meaningful or effective. Culturally competent care with Latinx populations often involves tapping into all three of these areas in order to bring about the most accessible and acceptable care (Ocampo Hoogasian & Chavez, in preparation).

Research Questions

1. How has your family, culture, spirituality, and religion led the way you want to integrate traditional and Western therapy?
2. What are some challenges of integrating traditional healing methods and Western medicine in the larger Western society and one's personal life?
3. What are some examples of the ways you use traditional healing in your work with patients and overall practice?
4. How do you navigate boundaries or ethical concerns that arise in integrating these two types of treatment?

Setting and Procedure

- Participants recruited through purposive, non-parametric sampling, and word of mouth.
- Semi-structured interviews of three primary research questions, lasting between 30 to 60 minutes via telephone or zoom.
- Interviews were audio or video taped and transcribed.
- Transcripts analyzed using stage-like process of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith & Osborn, 2003).
- At each stage of analysis, information audited by individual with clinical and cultural knowledge of research area.

Participant Demographics

- 7 Western treatment providers (4 males, 3 females)
 - 3 psychologist, 2 medical doctors, 1 licensed professional counselor, 1 midwife
- Age ranged between 35-75 years
 - 2 identified as Gay, 2 identified as indigenous as well as Latinx
- 3 Latinx, 2 Latinx/White, 1 Brazilian, 1 White
- All participants have specialties in Curanderismo
 - 3 indicated limpias and platicas
 - 1 indicated using plant medicine
 - 1 indicated embodied methods like breathwork and using elements
 - 1 indicated broad healing work and a focus on education
 - 1 platicas and midwifery

Expected Findings

- The healer's personal and educational experiences in traditional, Western, and integrative therapies will inform their view of these integrative therapies today.
- The importance of building relationships and trust between therapist and client and the role of ceremonies and interventions in the therapeutic process will be prominent.
- The challenges faced by healers in the U.S. due to lack of formal credentials, the importance of intentionality and consent in the healing process, and the differences in roles, expectations, and boundaries between Curanderismo and conventional medicine will be discussed.

Qualitative Findings

Domain 1: Family Heritage Influences Treatment Modalities

Theme 1: Traditional healing experiences growing-up

There's pictures that I have seen where I'm at certain spiritual places in Mexico...my family used to go to a curandero in Monterrey... So as a kid, I remember they would always send me to the store to go get (items for ceremony)...my aunts were involved in all of the healing practices and perspectives...they were also mediums that would channel different spirits and my mother is also one who channels spirits.
-Santiago

Domain 2: Traditional Healing vs. Western Medicine

Theme 1: Limitations of Western Medicine

It does bother me how there is no value or attention paid to traditional healing ways, when there's such power and such value in the plants and lifestyle changes and changes of heart and changes of thinking.
-Curandero MD

Domain 3: Integrating the Two Worlds

Theme 1: Fears of integrating the two worlds

It takes up a lot of your mental and spiritual space that you could be using to help heal people, right? ...like this other extra burden of like a minority therapist...It's the worry of, 'If I do it this way, if it's going to be accepted...' If you have a supervisor who's reviewing your notes or insurance needs to do an audit, or the board...There you could get in trouble, right? -Santiago

Domain 3: Integrating the Two Worlds

Theme 2: Doctors' dilemmas during integration

Doctors make mistakes, certainly...Where most doctors now are working within a system hierarchy where they don't have the power that a lot of people think they do. There's a lot of things that are controlled by insurance and administrators... And what are their priorities? ... I think that's a lot of it...Being afraid of change, being afraid of losing power.
-Hawkeye

Domain 4: The Need for Culturally Competent Care

Theme 1: The reason we need people like us in Western spaces

I have some Osha root in my office at the university and I keep it there as protection...to help me in this foreign environment, foreign from my family...I believe I'm meant to be at the college, at the university, because of the guidance of my ancestors. But, in a place that I have often felt unsafe and different, wondering what the heck I am doing here...I've gotten signs from my ancestors that this is where I'm supposed to be...I'm consciously there to help support the students that also [see] the university to be a foreign place. -Michelle

Discussion and Implications

- **The Need for Culturally Competent Care**
 - Latinx populations continue to suffer health disparity across multiple domains due to: cultural differences and language barriers; low levels of income, education, or health insurance coverage; and general dissatisfaction with Western treatment. Due to these factors, Latinx individuals may seek out treatment from traditional healers and/or engage spiritual resources to support wellness (Cruz et al., 2022).
 - Younger generations who don't have access to ancestral knowledge due to colonization, acculturation, and language barriers (Sánchez-Muñoz & Amezcua, 2019; Sánchez-Muñoz, 2013), lose out on important avenues toward health and wellness.
 - Despite this slipping away of ancestral knowledge over generations, there is increased interest in bringing to light the work and wisdom of knowledge keepers and elders in Latinx communities (Ocampo Hoogasian & Chavez, in preparation).
- **Integrating the Two Worlds**
 - Arredondo et al. (1996) stated that counselors establish awareness and sensitivity to client issues, are aware of their own biases and limitations, gain knowledge of personal and others' social impact, and seek skills to better understand culturally different populations.
 - Counselors must approach treatment with awareness, respect, acceptance, and openness to the expression and incorporation of physical, mental, and spiritual elements in their work with Latinx clients (Faver & Cavazos, 2009).
 - Appreciating the depth of meaning that spirituality holds for Latinx clients is often what sets Curanderismo apart from Western treatment (Ocampo Hoogasian, et al., 2020).
 - Challenges will arise in integrated work because of inherent differences between the two disciplines surrounding ethical standards and boundaries (Stronger Together, 2023).
 - Western treatment providers who want to be more integrative in their practice must consider a number of factors before engaging this work with clients, including: thorough training in each modality, credentialing differences (e.g. Western training and licensure vs. Apprenticeship and recognition of ability to use traditional medicine through elders and the community), informed consent related to the distinction between treatment methods and approaches, and billing and financial considerations (e.g. Insurance coverage vs. Notions of reciprocity in traditional healing) (Stronger Together, 2023).
 - An emergent theoretical orientation for psychotherapeutic work with Latinx communities utilizing Mesoamerican ancestral knowledge will shed more light on more seamless integration (Chavez, in preparation).