

From Canada to Haiti and Nunavut: A critical reflection of cultural competence in occupational therapy

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Introduction: What happens when occupational therapy practice, as it is understood and taught in North America is taken to other cultural places? The reflective experiences of a Canadian occupational therapist providing rehabilitation services to people in Haiti and Nunavut/Arctic will be critically examined from the perspective of cultural competency. For therapists to be culturally competent, they must acknowledge the importance of culture, and assess cultural difference and cross-cultural relations. Therapists need to develop knowledge and understanding about specific cultural contexts, and adapt rehabilitation services to meet the unique cultural needs of their clients.

Objectives: The purpose of this paper is to critically explore the concept of cultural competence in the context of providing occupational therapy in Haiti and Nunavut. The limitations of cultural competence will be discussed and the issue of cultural safety will be considered as an inclusive alternative.

Description: Differences in cultural belief systems around the causes and management of disability will be explored using examples. Clinical and ethical dilemmas associated with applying concepts from North American occupational therapy practice models to rehabilitation services in Haiti and the Arctic will be identified. The need to adapt rehabilitation services to fit local cultural needs will be highlighted and addressed.

Discussion: As a result of clinical experiences in Haiti and Nunavut, this therapist developed the skills necessary for culturally competent practice in diverse contexts. However, through a process of critical reflection the limitations of cultural competence were revealed. A realization of the necessity of cultural safety rather than cultural competence emerged.

Conclusion: Reflections and challenges of providing occupational therapy services in various diverse contexts provide opportunities for examining the concepts of cultural competency and cultural safety. The experiences of a Canadian occupational therapist highlight the necessity of providing culturally safe services when working in multi-cultural contexts.

Contribution to practice: Cultural competence and cultural safety are important concepts in occupational therapy, especially given the interest in global occupational therapy initiatives. In order for occupational therapy to be relevant and inclusive of diverse clients, and in order to avoid doing harm, it is necessary for cultural safety to be considered and practiced.