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The Inevitability of Cultural Incompetence: Tolerating Racial Discomfort

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Abstract

Psychologists in the Western world must meet cultural competency standards in their professional practice. In New Zealand, evidence has shown that despite this, mental health outcomes for indigenous Māori populations have not improved. Claims of industry-wide culturally incompetent care towards Māori called for the investigation of non-Māori psychologists' experiences of achieving *cultural competency* and working with indigenous Māori clients in this present study. Through interviewing nine clinical psychologists, it was found that participants grappled with issues related to *White Fragility* and *paralysis*. The fear of 'getting things wrong' is dissected in relation to the colonising tendency to have control and acquire knowledge, and professional tendency to avoid feelings of incompetence and maintain authority. Right-wrong paradigms were often predicated on fears of being racist. Participants described developing an understanding of structural racism and individual complicity. An alternative approach towards cultural competency is explored where psychologists adopt a politics of disappointment in which they forgo a desire for mastery as the experts within therapeutic relationships, and instead accept feelings of unresolve and uncertainty to not fully understand their indigenous clients. Humility is discussed as being the necessary ethical quality in order for psychologists to learn and develop their cultural practice without placing demand on their indigenous counterparts to respond in certain ways or to teach. Participants discussed using discomfort as an indicator of healthy growth beyond their constrained or biased point of view. The ethical importance and responsibility for psychologists to engage in critical reflexivity and tolerate cultural/racial discomfort is discussed.

Keywords: clinicians, competency, cultural-differences, racism, white-fragility