

## Culturally Competent Approaches for Counseling Urban Appalachian Clients: An Exploratory Case Study

Shirley M. Keller  
Lonnie R. Helton

**ABSTRACT.** The authors examine the application of a strengths-based empowerment approach to working with an urban Appalachian woman and her family. The purpose of this article is to start the research process by utilizing the lessons learned to assist health and human service practitioners. Key points are identified in developing awareness and intervention skills when working with clients who have an Appalachian cultural heritage. This case study utilizes a culturally competent framework for assessing and intervening with Appalachian clients that emphasizes the strengths and empowerment literature. As the foundation for further research, this case study provides a rationale for starting evidence-based practice incorporating a strengths-based empowerment theme. Case study research is limited by its focus on one individual within a specific span of time and cultural context; findings cannot always be generalized to a similar population. Suggestions for further research in this area are provided.

**KEYWORDS.** Appalachian values, urban Appalachians, women, strengths-based empowerment, counseling theories, cultural competence

Culturally competent health and human service practice in the 21st century is essential in working with the many ethnically diverse client populations in the United States, such as Appalachians. Appalachian people are a unique minority population generally identified by their geographic location and their culture. However, Appalachians have only recently been fully recognized as a distinct ethnic group in the counseling and human service disciplines (Gollnick & Chinn, 1998). The purpose of this article is to assist health and human service practitioners in developing awareness and intervention skills in working with clients identified as Appalachian.

Too often, persons living in or migrating from the Appalachian region are simply referred to as being rural or poverty stricken. The authors, themselves being Appalachian social workers, recognize the significance of understanding the unique value system and worldviews of persons of Appalachian heritage. Furthermore, the authors have been increasingly asked to share their insights and skills in working with a range of challenges affecting Appalachian clients in urban areas. A case study of an urban Appalachian woman and her family is presented to clarify how select counseling theories can be utilized in accordance with specific Appalachian

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Shirley M. Keller, PhD, LISW-S, ACSW, is Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work, Youngstown State University, Ohio.

Lonnie R. Helton, EdD, LISW-S, ACSW, is Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Cleveland State University, Ohio.

Address correspondence to: Shirley M. Keller, Youngstown State University, Department of Social Work, One University Plaza, Youngstown, OH 44555 (E-mail: smkeller@ysu.edu)

cultural values for client assessment and empowerment.

The Appalachian Regional Commission (2009) defines Appalachian people as persons who have a parent or grandparent born in the 420 county area that make up the Appalachian region. The region includes all of West Virginia and parts of the following states: New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Appalachians possess a strong work ethic and a rich cultural heritage consisting of many values and traditions. Appalachian people espouse many of the values and beliefs of their pioneer ancestors, most of whom came from England, Scotland, Ireland, and other western European nations. However, the culture also includes a range of subcultures including African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, and Eastern Europeans (Hayden, 2004).

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Jones (1994), a well-known sociologist and Appalachian scholar, identified 10 specific beliefs and traditions that make up Appalachian cultural values. Appalachian people espouse the values and beliefs of their pioneer ancestors. These values include: (a) independence, self-reliance, and pride; (b) neighborliness; (c) familism; (d) personalism; (e) religion; (f) humility and modesty; (g) love of place; (h) patriotism; (i) sense of beauty; and (j) a sense of humor. Jones's work, along with that of others (Ambrose & Hicks, 2006; Eller, 1982; Helton, 1995; Weller, 1965), has provided insights necessary for counseling Appalachian clients, who have long been considered to be an oppressed and misunderstood population. And, many Appalachians today have become part of an invisible minority, especially those of third and fourth generational heritage living in urban areas. Culturally competent social workers and other human service professionals must understand Appalachian values, as well as the historical and political influences on their lives.

Professionals who intervene with Appalachians need to be aware that they are personalistic, value interpersonal relationships, and may go to

great lengths not to offend others. They generally prefer an informal style of communication, are individualistic and self-reliant, and forge strong kinship bonds that they maintain throughout their lives. According to Jones (1994) and Weller (1965), Appalachians tend to be more person-oriented than object-oriented and it is noted that social relationships are central to their existence within the culture.

Weller (1965) and Hicks (1976) observed that loyalty to family is woven into the fabric of the culture. Hansen and Resnick (1990) stated that Appalachians' strong sense of family may serve as an asset for health and human service intervention. Crissman (1989) and Obermiller and Maloney (1994) found that while extended family relationships have been traditionally valued, nuclear family bonds were especially strong and honored. Schwarzeller, Brown, and Mangalam (1971) found an extremely strong kinship network among families in the region and those who had migrated to the urban Midwest. They used the metaphor of a tree with the family serving as the roots and trunk for the branches, which have spread out and taken migrants to urban areas for work and new opportunities. With urban Appalachians, practitioners need to be mindful that recognizing and working with the family system as a whole is indispensable for success. This close kinship bond might seem completely inconsistent with the value of individualism, but actually the family's continual support is a means for developing independence and self-reliance. From a counseling standpoint, the Appalachian value of self-reliance may seem stronger than the client's desire for help (Greenlee & Lantz, 1993); that is, the client does not want to appear to be indebted to another. Being aware of this value, the practitioner needs to reframe the helping process from one wherein the client seems dependent to one wherein he or she feels empowered.

Appalachian people have depended not only on the strong kinship system within their culture in times of need but also on a strong community connection—neighborliness. Moreover, Appalachians tend to be spiritual and have strong religious beliefs that are grounded largely in Protestant fundamentalist belief systems. Their beliefs often lead them to demonstrate a “leveling” attitude; that is, they believe that they are

as good as anybody else, yet do not consider themselves to be better. A practitioner, therefore, needs to realize that clients might not accentuate their own strengths because they do not want to appear to brag or place themselves on a pedestal. They may not take credit for accomplishments, but rather defer successes to others. Consequently, the practitioner must not take Appalachian clients at their self-effacing word and devalue them and their abilities.

Appalachian people tend to be fatalistic and often believe that life events occur because of "God's will" (Lewis, Mesner, & McDowell as cited in Yelton & Nielson, 1991). They believe that hard work and suffering do not always ensure a successful life. Consequently, Appalachian clients might ignore or postpone the need for help, believing that nothing can be done to alter what is happening in their lives.

Moreover, they typically have a strong sense of place and an almost symbiotic attachment to the Appalachian region. Harper and Lantz (1992) noted that the love of place has as much to do with the kinship system as it does with a feeling of connection to the natural beauty of the region. Appalachians seem to be characterized by an inherent sense of beauty as evidenced by their closeness to nature, their love for music, and their ability to create exquisite handmade crafts such as quilts, dolls, furniture, and baskets. A good sense of humor is also identified as a common Appalachian cultural trait, which often serves as a sustaining force during hard times (Jones, 1994). The practitioner must be aware of the importance of this cultural value in helping the client to cope with a range of problems over time.

There are limited actual case studies that provide culturally competent guidelines for health and human service professionals (Rothman, 2008). Cultural competence is defined as an ongoing process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, sexes, ethnic backgrounds, religions, sexual orientations, abilities, and other diversity factors "in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2001).

The social work profession's *Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* emphasizes strengths and empowerment perspectives and the need to know the limitations and advantages of using current counseling theories, processes, and practice models that have specific application and relevance to the service needs of culturally diverse client groups (NASW, 2001).

### **STRENGTHS-BASED EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK**

The authors have developed a culturally competent framework for assessing and intervening with Appalachian clients by emphasizing the strengths and empowerment literature (Garvin & Seabury, 1997; Greene, 2007; Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 2003; Lee, 2001; Saleebey, 2009; Van Hook, 2008). A strengths-based empowerment (SBE) framework was used for conceptualizing and integrating a range of counseling theories and approaches that are appropriate for culturally competent practice with Appalachians.

The strengths-based empowerment framework that the authors developed included culture, empowerment approaches, critical consciousness, resiliency, capabilities, and strengths. The main focus of the SBE framework is to integrate the culture of the client system into assessment, planning, and the use of counseling theories for intervention. Empowerment is used to help the clients achieve control over various aspects of their life situations. Empowerment considers the personal, interpersonal, and sociopolitical dimensions of a person's life. Critical consciousness is used to understand power relationships and to help Appalachian clients, especially women, to comprehend the social, political, and historical forces on their lives. Furthermore, this process helps clients be more self-aware in determining the meaning of these forces in their lives. Resiliency is the quality that enables clients to thrive during times of adversity and to bounce back to a prior level of successful functioning. Strengths serve as resources for coping while capabilities address the client's competencies or skills in performing life's tasks.

The authors have focused on compiling elements of SBE approaches that are effective in working with Appalachian clients. Each of these approaches or theories emphasizes empowerment and helps clients to identify and enhance their inner and outer strengths and abilities. D'Andrea and Daniel (as cited in Harley, Jolivet, McCormick, & Tice, 2002) state that it is crucial in counseling diverse populations to apply multitheoretical approaches versus choosing one approach. A case application is presented to elucidate specific strategies and techniques for working with an urban Appalachian woman and her family. The practitioner used the SBE framework to empower the client to perceive herself differently so that she can realize what is within her power to make decisions for herself, overcome challenges, and bring about change in her life.

### **APPROACHES AND THEORIES FOR WORKING WITH APPALACHIAN CLIENTS**

#### ***Feminist Therapy***

According to Sharf (2008), the aims of feminist therapy are characterized by (a) an emphasis on recognizing the influence of political and social forces on women and culturally diverse groups, (b) an open and egalitarian relationship between client and social worker, and (c) an appreciation of the female and culturally diverse perspectives on life. Empowerment and social action are central to using the feminist approach in counseling. The central themes of feminist therapy that apply to working with Appalachian women are: recognizing the powerful impact of the cultural context on women's lives, realizing the importance of relationships as the central organizing feature in women's development, and appreciating strengths that are embodied in women's relational qualities and activities (Corey, 2009; Walsh, 2006).

#### ***Social Constructivism***

Social constructivist theory analyzes how clients make sense of the activities and events

of their world. This theory emphasizes the interchange between people and their environment, culture, and historical context (Sisnos, Stakeman, Joyner, & Schmitz, 2008). The major themes of social constructivist theory that apply to counseling Appalachian clients are: recognizing that there are no universal truths and that meaning is created by people as they communicate and develop relationships with each other, realizing language and culture are avenues for the exchange of ideas and meaning, establishing a safe environment in which individuals and families explore the meaning of events, and suggesting that through creating new meaning for events, people can overcome challenges (Corey, 2009; Walsh, 2006).

#### ***Solution-Focused Therapy***

DeJong and Berg (2002) indicate that solution-focused therapy helps clients to identify and expand their strengths and resources so that they can expend their energies in finding solutions to presenting problems. Appalachian clients can benefit from solution-focused therapy, which includes the following principles: examining what is working in their lives, considering exceptions to problems, exploring what the client hopes to achieve by going step by step to find positive solutions, helping the client gain control by imagining a positive self-chosen direction, and exploring alternative ways of achieving success (Corey, 2009; Sperry, Carlson, & Kjos, 2003; Walsh, 2006).

#### ***Narrative Therapy***

The goal of narrative therapy is to help the clients first understand the stories around which they have organized their lives and then begin to challenge these "truths." During this process clients will be able to perceive their strengths, thus enabling them to change their perception of their story and create new realities for improving their lot in life (Kelley, 2002). Major themes of narrative therapy that apply to counseling Appalachian clients are as follows. Narrative therapy states that behavior is shaped by the meaning clients give to events. It also suggests that as people create meaning with others, they create a life story and by recognizing that

a person's life story contains information about how he or she has met life's critical events, the client can be helped to examine his or her story, discover alternative meanings, and explore ways to tell his or her story differently (Corey, 2009; Sharf, 2008).

### ***Existential Theory***

In existential theory, the most basic human motivation is the will to find a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Existentialism is concerned with how persons relate to the world around them, to others, and to their own sense of self (Sharf, 2008). In existential theory several key principles are evident for counseling Appalachian clients. Existentialism recognizes that clients are not victims; rather, they have the freedom to choose what they want to be. Existentialism states that as people make choices, they grow. Further, it suggests that helping others in the community validates one's self and indicates that although people may not be able to change an event they can change the way they think about it (Corey, 2009; Corsini & Wedding, 2008).

### ***Cognitive Therapy***

Cognitive therapy purports to undermine faulty assumptions and irrational beliefs and teach clients the coping skills required to deal with their problems (Corey, 2009). Cognitive therapy recognizes that emotions are based on how clients think about themselves and acknowledges that clients can overcome irrational beliefs and self-defeating patterns of behavior. Cognitive therapy applies to Appalachians in that it teaches clients to help themselves, take responsibility for their actions, and develop cognitive strategies that foster a sense of mastery and control (Corsini & Wedding, 2008; Sperry et al., 2003).

### ***Family Systems Theory***

Corey (2009) indicates that individuals are best understood through assessing the interactions between and among family members. Family systems theory is centered around the following themes: group membership, affilia-

tions, and functioning of the family as a whole. Family systems theory recognizes that family and community systems have the ability to adapt to stress, realizes that belief systems influence the capacity to maintain continuity and tolerate change, and acknowledges that family members have the ability to transform and explore alternative solutions (Papero, 2002; Sharf, 2008). This approach is especially appropriate for Appalachian clients who rely on the family as a major support system and realize the solid relationship between the family and the community. An Appalachian person's problem is often perceived as a problem being faced by the entire family, including extended family members.

## ***CASE STUDY***

Lillie Mae Crawford (not her real name) is a 28-year-old, divorced, second-generation Appalachian female. She lives on the west side of Cleveland in a substandard apartment complex with her two sons: Billy, age 6, and Eddie, age 7. Her oldest child, Martin, died early last year at age 10 in a tragic apartment fire. The fire was attributed to the absence of smoke detectors in the building. Lillie Mae works part time as a waitress in a local restaurant and looks forward to her work each day. She says that keeping busy and joking with her friends at work help to "keep her mind off things." She receives public assistance benefits (a medical card and food stamps), but just barely makes ends meet. She is in constant conflict with her ex-husband, Bill Crawford (age 32), over his not keeping up with child support payments. Until his recent layoff, Bill worked for a car manufacturer and had a steady income. The couple was married for 8 years, having divorced about 2 years ago. Lillie Mae had dropped out of school to marry Bill when she became pregnant. She completed 3 years of high school and hopes to obtain her GED so that she can get a better job. Lillie Mae is close to her own mother, Betty Jo Ledford, and her sister, Judy Ledford, who live in the Slavic Village neighborhood of Cleveland, only a few miles away. They work in an auto-parts factory and provide lots of emotional support to Lillie Mae and her sons. Lillie Mae's father died when she was 13 years old.

Betty Jo was born in Kanawha County, West Virginia, and goes back there to visit extended family members and friends at least five or six times a year. Lillie Mae and her kids usually go along and she gets a chance to see her friend Lucy in West Virginia, who also is single and has two children. Lillie Mae also visits with another friend, Daisy. The Ledford family moved to Ohio when Lillie Mae was only 6 years old. She owns an old sub-compact car, but it breaks down often; she has to rely regularly on her mother, Judy, and her neighbors for transportation.

The boys, Billy and Eddie, are respectively in the first and second grades. Eddie's teacher has noted that Eddie seems to have great difficulty concentrating and has major challenges with reading. Billy is thought to have some speech articulation problems. The boys' teachers at Westside Elementary have called Lillie Mae repeatedly about setting up an appointment to discuss these concerns. She missed the first appointment due to an appointment with her Legal Aid attorney. The public health nurse, Ms. Baker, had encouraged Lillie Mae to pursue legal action against the landlord regarding Martin's death in the apartment fire. Lillie Mae had found this challenge to be very difficult and laughingly said that she was not the type of person to take on the system.

### ***Strengths and Challenges of the Client***

Lillie Mae, herself, demonstrated much inner strength by asking for help when she realized she needed it. The construction of a map of the family system (aka an eco-map) is a tool that can be used to show the range of support systems available to Lillie Mae as well as systems that pose difficulty for her. She received ongoing daily support from her mother and sister and her coworkers at the restaurant. Moreover, Lillie Mae's involvement with the local Baptist church helped to sustain her as did regular contact with her friends Lucy and Daisy in West Virginia. The social worker and public health nurse met with Lillie Mae separately and collaboratively at her home, bolstering her self-confidence and parenting skills and encouraging her to seek assistance from Legal Aid.

Lillie Mae faced regular difficulties or stressors that made life challenging and tested her resilience. She struggled to get by on limited financial resources, consisting of public assistance and earnings from her part-time job. Her ex-husband did not pay child support, which deprived the children and her of much-needed resources. She continued to grieve the loss of her oldest son and began a lawsuit against her former landlord for not having smoke detectors that might have saved her son's life. Also, Lillie Mae had to deal with the children's behavioral issues that were posing problems in school and at the day-care center.

## ***APPLICATION OF STRENGTHS-BASED EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK TO CASE STUDY***

### ***Feminist Theory***

In utilizing feminist theory in working with Lillie Mae, it was important to emphasize the relationship between her and the practitioner. Her psychological and social strengths were recognized and reinforced. Her Appalachian values of individualism and self-reliance were encouraged. These values undergirded her ability to engage in social action and take on the landlord to advocate for her family's rights. The practitioner helped to enhance her self-esteem, which increased her capacity to take care of herself and her family. With professional support, she also became interested in improving her education by going to school to obtain her GED, thus further empowering herself. The practitioner's development of an egalitarian relationship with Lillie Mae was consistent with her personalistic and informal communication style.

### ***Social Constructivism***

By applying social constructivism, the practitioners concluded that Lillie Mae's Appalachian values served her admirably in facing a range of personal and family problems. The practitioners assisted Lillie Mae in exploring the significance of problematic events in her life and helped her to

create new meanings of these events to enhance her coping ability. She had felt immobilized by the sudden, tragic death of her oldest son, her other sons' behavioral problems, and her difficult divorce and tenuous relationship with her ex-husband. Lillie Mae was helped to deconstruct her negative images of herself and her predicament in life by reconstructing the way she perceived and described her problems. In the reconstruction of these problematic events, the practitioners assisted her by tapping into her Appalachian values of humor, individualism, close kinship network, and neighborliness. She started to look at herself as a more resourceful and powerful woman who could face life's challenges with courage and conviction.

### ***Solution-Focused Therapy***

The practitioner used solution-focused therapy to help Lillie Mae focus on her assets and capabilities rather than dwelling on past or present problems. With solution-focused therapy, Lillie Mae was encouraged to look at possibilities for enhancing her life. She was encouraged to go back to school to complete her GED so that she could obtain a full-time job. Also, she began to examine what was working in her life and considered ways that she could use these strengths to improve her life. She became more aware of her self-reliance and past successes in problem solving. The practitioner used this insight to help Lillie Mae address her life challenges through alternative ways of achieving success. Lillie Mae, as an urban Appalachian woman, was always proud of her ability to resolve problems on her own. Thus, through solution-focused therapy, her self-reliance was further strengthened by reframing her life situation and looking toward a better future for herself and her children.

### ***Narrative Therapy***

The practitioner needs to understand that Lillie Mae stayed connected with her friends back in the mountains and shared with them her joys, sorrows, and hopes. This connection, along with her daily family support, kept her grounded in her culture and Appalachian heritage. Applying narrative therapy concepts not only helped Lillie Mae more fully understand her grief and

other life challenges, but also helped her re-tell her story, accentuating her resilience and self-reliance as major themes for coping. Lillie Mae was then moved away from feelings of powerlessness and doubt to proactive behaviors that strengthened her self-esteem and belief in her abilities. Moreover, Lillie Mae was empowered by narrative therapy principles as she gained insight into and emphasized different aspects of her story, such as success at her job, her supportive friendship network, her close family support system, and even her sometimes turbulent connection to the boys' father. With narrative therapy, Lillie Mae was able to work through her grief, realized what she had left in her life to live for, and advocated to make her life better for herself and her family.

### ***Existential Therapy***

Appalachians tend to be individualistic and self-reliant, seeking to take care of themselves without outside professional help. The practitioner used existential approaches by respecting Lillie Mae's quest for freedom and autonomy by encouraging personal responsibility that yielded positive results. With Lillie Mae, this approach was demonstrated in the social worker's and nurse's encouragement of her to work with the school and day care center concerning getting help for her children. Moreover, Lillie Mae realized that she could make choices and take the responsibility to advocate securing services that might enhance her and her family's quality of life.

### ***Cognitive Therapy***

Cognitive therapy was used effectively in helping Lillie Mae to overcome her perception of herself as being too modest and humble to take on the housing and legal systems. The practitioner helped Lillie Mae focus instead on her values of individualism, self-reliance, and pride in her past coping abilities to help her change her way of thinking. This change of attitude and thought patterns enabled her to advocate for herself and her children. Once she believed that she had the ability to help herself, she became more motivated to take action. Lillie Mae (realizing that her sons needed assistance beyond

her capacities as a parent) sought out additional professional services and followed through with recommended interventions. This led to ongoing positive help-seeking behaviors and resulted in the eventual winning of the legal case against her landlord.

### ***Family Systems Approach***

The practitioner had to understand the crucial role of the family in working with Lillie Mae. Family systems approach was used to assess the family system as a whole and considered how Lillie Mae's family provided ongoing support for coping with problems. In most Appalachian families, boundaries are tight and may initially appear to be too insular and rigid to the practitioner; however, the family serves as a cadre of strength. The practitioner realized that Lillie Mae benefitted from a close kinship network, receiving emotional support, child care, and transportation from her mother and sister who lived nearby. Thus, with Lillie Mae's permission, her extended family members participated in assessment and planning meetings. As a subsystem of an extended family network, she had a strong bond with her extended family and was able to continue to call on them for help in times of need.

### ***SUMMARY***

This case study, exemplifies the development of a culturally competent framework for working effectively with an urban Appalachian woman and her family. Strengths-based empowerment approaches and theories were successfully applied in the intervention process in accordance with their applicability to Appalachian cultural values and traditions. The client was able to gain more insight into her strengths and capabilities for enhancing her quality of life. Her Appalachian cultural values were utilized as a means for assisting her to become aware of her innate power and capacity for survival in a challenging urban environment. Utilizing her existing support systems of family, friends, and coworkers, she was also able to obtain professional services that aided her in coping with her life situation and successfully engaging with the

housing and legal systems. In the court hearing against the landlord, she won the case and was awarded \$76,000. The client went through a process of becoming more self-confident in her abilities to bring about positive changes in her life.

### ***Limitations of Case Study Research***

Case study research is limited by its reliability, that is, the generalizability of findings. Moreover, the researcher's intense involvement with the study can bias case findings. However, many researchers highly value case study research as an empirically sound method of qualitative inquiry. Yin (1984) stated that case study research is a form of qualitative inquiry that, "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life state" (Yin, 1984, p. 23). Case study research clearly enables the researcher to focus the research process in the direction of exploring complex phenomena and asking questions about the situation or problem to be studied.

Specifically, this case study research on an urban Appalachian woman initiates the process of furthering qualitative research on Appalachian women's values—both on those women born in the Appalachian mountain region and on those who grew up in non-Appalachian urban environments. The current research data affords a range of themes that may be further investigated to understand more fully the cultural values, traditions, and worldviews of Appalachian women. These cultural values may be explored comparatively within the context of resiliency theory, specifically the connections between Appalachian cultural values and internal and external resiliency assets. This case study explores how the subject's cultural beliefs and values motivate her to rely on her internal and external resiliency and, in doing so, enhance her coping skills.

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