



Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences Section - 2014

18 Delusions of the Devil or Malingered Psychosis? Cultural Considerations in Forensic Evaluations

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the importance of considering cultural context in forensic evaluations. Attendees will need to keep in mind the individual's cultural background when making psychiatric diagnosis, forensic formulations, and recommendations. Attendees will also have a better understanding of why ethnic background and religious beliefs should be taken into consideration when diagnosing malingering.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by elucidating the reasons why cultural context is important in forensic evaluations.

Forensic psychiatrists and psychologists are frequently asked to evaluate defendants from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Just as it is important in the clinical realm, good forensic evaluations need to appreciate the cultural context of the person evaluated. It is important to understand at least some of the cultural beliefs of the defendant in order to make psychiatric diagnoses, differentiate real psychiatric illness from malingering, assess the ability of the defendant to understand specific concepts, and generate formulations and forensic opinions. For example, for some cultures, it is more accepted to turn to religious leaders instead of mental health care providers when they are experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, or psychosis.

Sometimes, cultural norms influence the expression of symptoms. For example, if mental illness is not accepted in a culture, the patient may develop more somatic complaints of stress or depression. For instance, instead of acknowledging feelings of anxiety or depression, they may develop headaches, poor appetite, and insomnia. If a person is very religious and they become psychotic, they may believe they are having a negative or positive religious experience, such as hearing the voice of God or believing they are becoming possessed by the Devil. When assessing malingering in patients from different cultural backgrounds, it is important to keep cultural context in mind as well. Psychological testing is often used to assess malingering. However, it is important to understand how the testing is standardized and scored. Many of the tests are biased toward the dominant culture's knowledge and beliefs.

When updating the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* from IV to 5, a cultural issues subgroup was developed, "designed to improve the assessment of culture and context within psychiatric diagnosis."¹ Aggarwal also discusses the importance of adapting the cultural formulation for clinical assessments in forensic psychiatry when performing forensic evaluations.² These articles will be discussed in this presentation. In addition, specific examples will be provided, illustrating the importance of keeping cultural context in mind when evaluating defendants for purposes such as competence to stand trial and "not guilty by reason of insanity."

References:

1. Aggarwal NK, Lewis-Fernandez R. Culture and Psychiatric Diagnosis in Alarcón RD (ed): *Cultural Psychiatry. Advanced Psychosomatic Medicine*. Basel, Karger, 2013 vol. 33: p 15-30.
 2. Aggarwal NK. Adapting the Cultural Formulation for Clinical Assessments in Forensic Psychiatry. *Journal of American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 2012. 40: 113-18.
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Culture, Forensic Psychiatry, Malingering