

Considerations for Cross Cultural Applications of Core Energetics

A preliminary study

Abstract

With increasing awareness of differences in cultural needs, it is inevitable that Core Energetics practitioners will need sensitivity working with clients of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds from themselves. This preliminary study addresses a noticeable gap in Core Energetics research literature and cross cultural practice. In doing so, it examines theoretical dynamics of working with the body in psychotherapy cross culturally and hypothesizes that Core Energetics is culture bound and limited in its current format to effectively work with diverse populations.

The study collected data using an open-ended online survey examining the cross cultural applicability of Core Energetics from the international student, therapist and client body. A qualitative data analysis highlighted both etic and emic principles of Core Energetics, which supported the initial hypothesis that Core Energetics is culture bound. The elements which were considered more culturally subjective included; the expressive practice, developmental theory and spiritual framework. The study demonstrates that further research and a revision of theory is needed to develop a more culturally sensitive Core Energetics practice. In addition, the study summarises sample suggestions to highlight a number of ways in which this gap could be addressed, including potential collaborative research between training institutes to inform a more uniform cultural awareness training program.

With increasing awareness of differences in cultural needs, it is inevitable that Core Energetics practitioners will need sensitivity working with clients of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds from themselves. These cultural differences have unique implications in the therapeutic endeavour and are confounded for the Core Energetics practitioner who relies on, in addition to regular talk therapy, the use of somatic interventions involving self-expression and touch. Components of Core Energetics therapy, like mainstream psychotherapy, may be counterintuitive to certain cultural norms, values, traditions and beliefs; how one approaches these differences can significantly determine the success or failure of the therapeutic endeavour.

Talk therapy (one to one counselling) is essentially a product of the cultural context in which it was developed (Lee, 1999). This cultural context reflects inherent values, beliefs and assumptions that influence the way in which therapy, including Core Energetics, is delivered and practiced. Cross cultural competence can then be defined as the understanding and knowledge of ways in which these values, beliefs, traditions and worldviews might differ and how one might enter into a dialogue about those differences within the therapeutic context (Jacob, 2013). This preliminary study hypothesizes that Core Energetics is culture bound, limited by the individualistic cultural context and values in which it was developed. To date, limited research on issues relating to cross cultural competence in Core Energetics could be found. Due to the scarcity of data on this subject, research drawn from literature on body psychotherapy and cross cultural psychology are utilized and theoretically applied. By drawing on cross cultural psychological theory, the need for a revising current Core Energetics theory will be demonstrated as an important step towards increasing cultural relevancy for diverse populations. In addition to this, a qualitative analysis of feedback from students, practitioners and clients from the international core community will highlight strengths and weaknesses of the approach and suggest promising areas for future research.

For the purposes of this study, Core Energetics is defined as the unique synthesis and application of work developed by Dr John Pierrakos which incorporates a body-based psychotherapeutic process that draws on psychoanalytical and Reichian developmental principles, within a spiritual framework of the individual.

The term Culture will refer to “a unique meaning and information system, shared by a group and transmitted across generations, that allows the group to meet basic needs for survival, pursue happiness and wellbeing and derive meaning from life” as defined by Matsumoto and Young (2008). In accordance with Markus (2008) ethnicity will refer to “a dynamic set of historically derived and institutionalized ideas and practices that (a) allows people to identify or to be identified with groupings of people on the basis of presumed (and usually claimed) commonalities, including language, history, nation or region of origin, customs, ways of being, religion, names, physical appearance, and/or genealogy or ancestry; (b) can be a source of meaning, action and identity; (c) confers a sense of belonging, pride and motivation.”

Literature Review

Professional associations, like the American Psychological Association, are recognizing the need to inform culturally competent practitioners as part of the foundation of an ethically sound practice (Gallardo, Johnson, Parsham and Carter (2009). The need for cultural competence is not only a question of ethical standards, but also one of staying relevant in a world that is becoming increasingly globalized through the far reaching scope of technology and ease of transportation. Cultural competence is the future of engaging people in a paradoxically localized and global context. The question is then not one of why, but rather how? According to Heppner (2005) cross cultural competence is a life-long process of learning, whereas ABlack (2000) stresses the importance of knowing the self in relationship to one’s own culture as well as an understanding of the broader social context of the client’s cultural heritage. While many theories underlie the foundation of cross cultural competence and could be considered a valid component of any general cross cultural practice, the unique method of working with the body in Core Energetics includes additional elements to consider. Elements which to date has within Core Energetics literature and practice remain relatively unexamined.

Cross Cultural issues and Core Energetics

According to Pierrakos (2005) Core Energetics is founded on three core principles: the belief that each person has within them the capacity to heal, the psych-soma unity of humankind and that the

sum of the whole and its many parts are in constant movement towards a creative evolution. These founding principles are relatively broad and emphasize universality, that which is a common ground for humanity and poses an interesting challenge for the Core Energetics therapist, how does one accommodate individual differences in values, beliefs and expression without assimilating those differences into the existing framework of Core Energetics?

Cultural Display Rules

One example that highlights the etic (culture specific) vs. emic (universal) dilemma is demonstrated in the Core Energetics emphasis to penetrate the ‘mask’ (the aspects of the personality that creates a more desirable impression for others to ‘fit in’) alongside identifying and working with blocked feelings and emotions. It is generally accepted that humans express facial emotions much the same around the world and people can also identify these emotions across ethnic and cultural borders, however, current research suggests that the expression of facial emotion is determined by cultural display rules which are subject to situational, gender and cultural contexts (Matsumoto, 2007).

Cultural display rules assist in maintaining social hierarchy through social rules determining when is and isn’t appropriate to show emotion. An important distinction is made by Hogg and Vaughan (2011) “our face is used to express our emotions however we use display rules to communicate with others”, hence it is easier to understand facial signals and emotions if one belongs to the same in-group. For example, in Japan, controlling negative affect is considered a social norm and could be attributed to its role in collectivistic values of emphasizing group harmony (Matsumoto, 2007). Removed from its cultural context this norm might risk being evaluated on the grounds of its compromising effect for the individual as a ‘mask process’ when viewed within a Core Energetics framework. Such a value judgement risks shaming the individual and contrasts the values of an individualistic therapy process that emphasizes the wellbeing of the individual, with the collectivistic values of belonging in their cultural heritage (Patricia Haman, personal communication, February 27th, 2014).

White Privilege

Six friends are sitting in a lounge room discussing a much anticipated trip to the USA. For our Iranian friends it will be a first, and the visa application has proven a long and arduous process. The topic of customs allowance comes up and each person has an opinion. Jessica, who has travelled numerous times to the USA, justifies a lax attitude and replies she has never had an issue coming in or out of the country and border control. A second friend, mindful of our mutual friend's lengthy visa application process responded more thoughtfully "Because you are Iranian, you may need to be extra careful when coming through customs and make sure you have receipts and everything in check". (Jessica Nygren, personal communications, February 10th 2014).

Privilege, according to the Oxford dictionary (2014) refers to "A special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group". In the case mentioned above, the privilege of having an Australian passport and not Iranian passport meant I could assume less hassle obtaining a visa and going through customs, a privilege that had been subconsciously taken for granted until the discussion with friends. Therapy is a privilege, one that not everyone has the time or money to afford (Ann Bradney, personal communication, March 5th, 2014). As Core Energetics practitioners, the balance between meeting the needs of clients and the need to maintain a livelihood means that compromises cannot always be reached to meet the needs of people who might benefit the most. While each individual therapist must come to terms with how to manage that divide, the issue of privilege in therapy still remains as an overarching issue and can arise in many dynamics within the therapeutic relationship (Lee, 1999). These issues present in most therapies but can be confounded for the Core Energetics practitioner by the use of interventions involving the body.

Research conducted by Major and Heslin (1982) report that the use of touch can also signify status differences with people of higher status being more inclined to initiate touch. This would suggest that the use of touch within a therapeutic endeavour might not only raise issues of transference but also issues within the larger social, historical, racial, religious, gender, socio-economic context in which it occurs (Welfel, 2010). Privilege in this respect, could factor like 'colour blindness', a dynamic in which the therapist neglects racial identity to inform the psychotherapeutic

treatment of their patient, and in its avoidance, effectively perpetuates a discriminative system and undermine the therapeutic intervention (Blitz, 2006; ABlack, 2000).

The success of a therapeutic endeavour relies not only on how good the approach is but a combination of variables including “fit” of the modality for the client. Principles of universality are a valid practice, however individuals may still relate differently to these principles. As a therapist practicing cross culturally, it is important to enter into conversation about cultural and ethnic differences as part of informing a more culturally sensitive approach. Neglecting these dimensions limits not only the populations who might benefit from Core Energetics but also halts a necessary evolution of Core Energetics practice to include a broader range of human experience.

Methodology

Since its inception, Core Energetics has grown into numerous institutes around the world attracting clients, students and therapists from diverse backgrounds. In many ways this would seem to attest to the strength of its universality, however, very little research has been conducted to measure its efficacy in culturally and ethnically diverse populations. As a consequence, any cultural gaps or disparities have gone mostly unnoticed or been managed discretely by individual practitioners. The success or failure of this approach is difficult to estimate and presents a unique dilemma for data collection as the individuals who might offer the most insight perhaps no longer are involved, for reasons that may include lack of cultural ‘fit’. In the absence of obtaining data from this population, data was collected from the current student, client and therapist population. The sample has a significant bias in that most feedback is influenced by a favourable disposition inherent in their continued involvement or interest in the topic. To best reach this population an online survey was generated as it offered the most flexibility for people to access and participate in. Given the limitations of the sample and the preliminary nature of the study, a qualitative analysis was considered most appropriate to extract and analyse themes for future research.

Participants

The sample was recruited from online efforts and consequentially included people from many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds such as; European, UK, Australian, North American and

South American heritages. Limited demographics were collected as part of this survey, future research would benefit from addressing this gap.

Ethics: In accordance with USABP principles of professional and scientific responsibilities the author sought consultation with an external supervisor, Professor Marcel Duclois, in discussing concepts, ethics and revision of study and drafts. Participants were duly informed about the nature of the preliminary study prior to partaking and by following the link, assumed informed consent to participate. The author of the study made available her contact details including; name, phone number and email for anyone who had any questions prior to or following completion of the study. Following completion of the survey, the online survey monkey results and any online records were destroyed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

Materials

An online questionnaire (appendix A) was developed and personal interviews were conducted (5 in total). The questionnaire was created on www.surveymonkey.com and chosen for its state of the art security features. It is presumed that some mechanical subject loss occurred based on feedback from five individuals who were unable to follow the link and emailed the author of the study. A .doc version of the survey was forwarded to them, however it is difficult to estimate how many more were unable to access the web link and consequently did not follow through with filling out the survey. The personal interviews were initiated as part of the mail out of the survey and conducted for an average of 40 mins each. These interviews took place on the phone and via video on Skype.

Procedure

A short paragraph outlining the aims of the study and weblink was posted on social media platforms (facebook) and sent to email lists generated from online research to international Core Energetics Institutes including; Canada, USA, Australia, Brazil, England, Mexico, Netherlands and Italy. The web link was forwarded at each institute's discretion to their student/alumni body. In addition, the questionnaire was advertised to a broader somatic psychotherapy community via USABP

and EABP in their monthly newsletter. The questionnaire was sent out on February 7th 2014 and closed on April 7th 2014. At the time the survey closed, 80 responses were recorded.

Results

Based on the data, two distinct schools of thought emerged; one highlighting strengths of Core Energetics as a universal model, and another identifying areas in which Core Energetics is culture specific. For the purpose of analysis these themes were grouped according to the etic or emic principles the feedback most supported. A summary of findings was then categorized into sample general attitudes and demographics, etic and emic principles of Core Energetics and future recommendations for developing a more inclusive theory and practice of Core Energetics.

Sample: general attitudes and demographics

| Ethnic & Cultural Background of participants (n = 80) | |
|--|------------|
| Country | 76 |
| Skin color (white) | 30 |
| Religion | 27 |
| Sexual Orientation | 3 |
| Sex (male) | 1 |
| Total | 137 |

Note: participants gave more than one answer to the question

Table 1 Chart of ethnic and cultural background of respondents

The survey provided data in a number of ways, not only through the answers it generated but also in the manner with which practitioners/students and therapists considered their own cultural and ethnic identities in response to the questions. For example, when asked which cultural or ethnic background participants identified (no definition of culture or ethnicity was specified) five distinct themes including; country of origin, skin colour, sexual orientation, sex and religion emerged. The predominance of these themes suggests their

importance in shaping the participants identity and could indicate specific areas in which Core Energetics practitioners may need to consider broader cultural implications for clients. Of considerable interest to note is that only white skin colour was identified by the sample, which may be indicative of the privilege that comes with white skin and forms an inherent part of “white culture”.

| Impact of culture on sense of self (n=80) | |
|--|-----------|
| Significantly | 33 |
| Moderately | 27 |
| Some | 17 |
| Not significantly at all | 5 |
| Total | 80 |

Table 2 Impact of culture on sense of self

While the majority of the sample were in agreement that yes their cultural and ethnic background significantly impacted their sense of self, there was some variation in responses indicating degrees of awareness and or interest in ones cultural and ethnic heritage. Some responses highlighted an emic focus, *“A human being as to my essence, I feel I am something much bigger”*, others a more ambivalent attitude *“I don’t often think consciously about how my ethnic or cultural background impacts my sense of self”*.

The sample was also mostly in agreement that yes, they would feel comfortable seeing an ethnically or culturally different Core Energetics practitioner. Some felt it was irrelevant to the success of therapy, referring to the skill and rapport of the therapist as being more important. Others considered the differences to be *“grist for the mill”* and an opportunity to learn. And some who were concerned about doing so, identified issues of prejudice, fears about not being *“respected for their boundaries”*, understood for their

different background (values, social mores, life experiences) and potential language difficulties.

Strengths and etic principles of Core Energetics

| Would participants be comfortable seeing a therapist of a different ethnic or cultural background? | |
|---|-----------|
| Yes | 64 |
| No | 3 |
| Maybe | 13 |
| Total | 80 |

Table 3 Chart depicting if participants would be comfortable seeing a therapist of a different ethnic or cultural background

There was considerable reference to the unique in-depth journey a student undertakes to become a practitioner of Core Energetics and the confidence that such personal process work generates an open mindedness, increased capacity to love and an acute sensitivity to work with a broad spectrum of emotions and issues to meet a client no matter what their background is. Empathy was identified as a key tool as well as the capacity to identify and work with any aspect of human nature (even those considered taboo). Due to the somatic nature of the work, many considered the foundation of working with the body, energy and emotions to be a unitive factor in the process work that transcends cultural and ethnic divides. The spiritual framework was also considered inclusive as it recognizes the essential goodness inherent in everyone, connects people at their “core” and reframes challenges in relationship into a resilient and workable framework. For some however, the spiritual framework was questionable.

Opportunities for growth and emic principles of Core Energetics

Regardless of the depth of training, as one response stated “*you don’t know what you don’t know*” which summarised the feedback that some practitioners relied on a general awareness of cross cultural issues and had very little specific knowledge, “*Yes, I would be confident to work with clients from culturally diverse backgrounds BECAUSE I’m ok with being open about a potential lack of understanding of issues specific to different backgrounds*”. For example, what issues might need to be considered when working with African American or Asian populations. Lack of specific knowledge would also affect relevancy of therapeutic interventions, as any clients issue is also a component of the larger community, social and global context and “*different issues arise in different cultures*”. “*My experience is that often it is overlooked that the European culture is quite different from the American culture because we look similar, but we are definitely not! There are strong cultural differences and judgements*”.

Some feedback also questioned the impact of paternal vs maternal cultures and how different family structures might impact on early development, in particular for the transgender, bisexual and gay individuals who do not feel attracted to the opposite sex parent as is assumed in the Oedipal complex. “*Most of the writings are hetero-normative and some are outright homophobic*” and “*... an idea that being a lesbian or gay is something that is not completely natural and that it could have happened due to early young issues*” suggests that some theoretical frameworks need further research and revision to inform a more inclusive spectrum of human experience.

“*Some cultures do not permit or agree with the expression of emotion that occurs in core. You also need to be careful of what you say about some cultures family as they are very protective*”. Core Energetics uses expressive means when engaging in somatic interventions, these interventions could be confronting for some cultures more than others and stresses the

importance of entering into dialogue or finding creative ways of working with that expression in a different cultural context.

The use of a spiritual framework within a psychotherapeutic modality also raised concerns including the scientific validity of such a framework and the “*Christian overtones*” (Pathwork) which were not representative for many of their personal faith and belief systems.

Future recommendations

A variety of suggestions were made for how the theory could be revised and training institutions could promote and develop a more inclusive Core Energetic practice. These included:

Teaching material: increase lectures and reading material on how to hold differences, cultural awareness, cultural differences in development, gender roles, body image, meaning of touch, family systems and boundaries. By increasing the knowledge base of the therapist, they will be less likely to accidentally pathologize what might be a cultural norm or practice in another culture. Translate books and other material into other languages.

Teaching Institutions: could support an intercultural exchange between therapists of different cultural backgrounds, provide a contact list of therapists including their ethnic backgrounds as resources, continue to expand the work with multicultural trainings in different places in the world, offer financial support for training people from disadvantaged populations, attract more licensed practitioners who could offer the work to diverse populations and have students offer free sessions to community organizations with underserved populations. As well as address marketing and image, “*Core Energetics has no label, no obvious standards*”.

Theory: focus on how emotions are held in the body or nervous system rather than chakras and spirits which are more culturally polarizing, adapt language and readings to

include the experiences of LGBT community, acknowledge different religious practices (even that some people do not believe in god), encourage multilingualism in practitioners who are intent in working with different cultural groups (*“clients express their energies VERY differently in their native languages”*). Core Energetics could also open up to incorporate newer theories and research.

Discussion

As hypothesized, significant issues were raised in the survey and interviews and certainly warrant additional discussion and research. These issues broadly reflect themes of: how to work respectfully with and hold differences, expanding on specific knowledge of cultural and ethnic issues and how they impact Core Energetics, a revision of current theoretical frameworks in regards to developmental factors including the impact of paternal vs. maternal cultures and the LGBT community, further inquiry as to etic and emic principles of Core and how to diversify the Core Energetics community in general (client, students, therapists).

Responses varied significantly and would seem relative to the degree in which individuals were aware, had personal experience and specific knowledge of cultural factors within the therapeutic process. This variation suggests that one's personal awareness of culture, ethnicities are being used as references to gauge the extent to which cultural and ethnic factors may impact in the delivery of Core Energetics. A more uniform training in cultural awareness across the Core Energetics training programs would address this variation, increase the knowledge base and skill set of practitioners of how to enter into dialogue with difference, regardless of the practitioner's personal preferences. Additional research examining the ways in which Core Energetics is culture specific could be used to inform such programs, and given the international nature of the training institutes, could be conducted and shared between the Core Energetics communities.

It would seem that some aspects of Core Energetics translate well across cultures i.e. the understanding of the ways in which energy flows in the body and the tools which are used to assist this movement of energy (Patricia Haman, personal communication, February 27th, 2014). And some areas, such as some developmental theory and spiritual frameworks may be more culturally subjective.

However, more research is needed to discriminate between which aspects apply across etic and emic principles. Future research might also benefit attaining a more diverse sample across all the Institutes from the student, practitioner and client populations. Addressing the demographics gap in this study could also provide some interesting data. If there was a creative way of reaching populations who have tried Core Energetics therapy and moved on for reasons including lack of cultural fit for such research, this population could offer valuable and much needed perspective to this topic.

Ultimately the effectiveness of any approach is not gauged by its ability to be everything for everyone but rather by its ability to adapt and include distinctiveness. Raising awareness of the ways in which Core Energetics is culture specific may paradoxically strengthen its effectiveness with diverse populations, provided that this knowledge is sensitively applied in practice.

Appendix A: Survey for Cross Cultural applications of Core Energetics

1. What ethnic or cultural background do you identify with?

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2. How strongly does this impact your sense of self?

- Significantly Moderately Some Not significantly
at all

3. Would you be comfortable seeing a Core Energetics therapist of a different ethnic or cultural background to yours?

- Yes No Maybe

Other (please specify).....

4. If you wrote yes, what is it about Core Energetics that gives you confidence a therapist from any culture or ethnic background will be able to comprehensively address your issues?

.....

5. If you replied no or maybe, please write what kind of issues would concern you about seeing a therapist from a different culture?.....

.....

6. Is there any aspect of Core Energetics that does not 'fit' with your ethnic or cultural background?.....

.....

7. As a student or practicing therapist, would/are you confident to work with clients from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds? If yes, why?

If no, why not?.....

.....

8. In your opinion, how could the Core Energetics approach and theory become more relevant to people with culturally and linguistically different backgrounds?

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9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of culture, ethnicity and Core Energetics?

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