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Working with Paradoxes: Moving from dialectical opposition to interdependent growth in culturally diverse female cancer survivors

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Pscho-Spiritual Integrated Therapy (PSIT) is a psychosocial and psycho-educational intervention. In this study, it was used to support breast cancer survivors to learn to acknowledge and work with paradoxes (areas of ambiguity, inconsistency and contradiction), which would help them understand, cope with, and transcend the role of cancer in their lives. Previous research established the presence of paradoxes in European Caucasian cancer survivors, but the role of paradoxes among culturally diverse breast cancer survivors, or among participants in an intervention such as PSIT, was not examined. This study examined the experience of 12 breast cancer survivors (6 culturally diverse/6 European Caucasian) who participated in an 8-week PSIT intervention and asked 3 specific questions. First, which of the paradoxes identified in previous research were experienced by breast cancer survivors in the current study? Second, what new paradoxes emerged from the 12 participants' responses? Third, how did culturally diverse women expand the range of paradoxes in the PSIT intervention? This third question aimed to contribute to an under-researched area: culturally diverse breast cancer survivors. The study used a qualitative methodology, based on a thematic analysis of 12 participant interviews in order to identify paradox themes among breast cancer survivors. Findings included the following: (a) the PSIT group replicated 3 paradoxes named in a previous study by Halstead and Hull; (b) that the PSIT participants developed the ability to work with each side of a paradox and hold interdependent opposing realities together simultaneously, while extending the range of paradoxes to include themes of interconnection, personal empowerment, and spiritual edges and tensions; (c) that culturally diverse PSIT participants expanded the range of paradoxes. They built an awareness, not only of the contradictory and co-existing elements of the paradoxes, but also of how these elements could work together to create balance and deeper integration. Culturally diverse participants searched for authentic spiritual experiences, which included self-transcendence during or after the integration of paradoxes. They contributed to subthemes that expressed the value of their insight gained from witness consciousness (neutral-observer stance), their experiences of moderating control and surrender, and their movement from self-criticism to self-understanding.

Biography

Kirti Patel has completed her Ph.D. from Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, which is now Sofia University in Palo Alto, California. She has published her research in the Journal of Religion and Health and has served as a Board member of the Association of Transpersonal Psychology since 2007. She has taught psychology and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in the San Francisco Bay area and beyond. Kirti served as Humanities adjunct faculty at an American University in Manama, Bahrain and studied shamanic traditional medicine healing and Quichua language, through a FLAS Fellowship, in the Ecuadorian Amazonian Jungle. She facilitates groups in mindful awareness, Emotional Intelligence, and compassion work with a growth mindset so that she can take on new challenges and projects and give talks on these topics.

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