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Excessive Alcohol Use in Charlotte County, Florida

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:
Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Social Change Portfolio

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: Prevention, excessive alcohol use, adults, Charlotte County, Florida

Excessive Alcohol Use in Charlotte County, Florida

Goal Statement: The goal of this project is to reduce self-reported excessive alcohol use in adults above the age of 18 in Charlotte County, Florida, using prevention-based life skills programs in the local public schools, community education, and advocating for increased availability of bilingual telehealth therapy options for individuals who are unable to attend counseling in-person.

Significant Findings: Charlotte County in southwest Florida is a rapidly growing area for residents and vacationers alike. Although a naturally beautiful destination, excessive alcohol use is higher here than the state average, and motor vehicle crash deaths involving alcohol are significantly greater than both state and national averages (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2024). Alcohol use is a contributing factor to a multitude of physical and mental illnesses, resulting in a massive economic burden on society. These negative consequences disproportionately impact marginalized populations such as LGBTQ+ community members and Hispanic males. The county can reduce this financial strain through increased prevention. Evidence-based prevention programs, education, and advocacy for marginalized groups can help lessen the adverse effects of alcohol on Charlotte County.

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps: Prevention begins by partnering with the local school district to ensure that existing life skills programs are implemented with fidelity and available in Spanish. Increasing the availability of multilingual telehealth therapy is essential to

reaching community members without access to transportation. Counselors should partner with local spiritual and religious institutions that will welcome and affirm the identities of marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ individuals to increase the availability of alcohol prevention and treatment programs. There is a need to partner with community organizers to create opportunities for alcohol-free social activities to reduce loneliness and isolation. Counselors can work with local politicians, businesses, and community groups to advocate for stricter alcohol policies that will reduce excessive alcohol use.

INTRODUCTION

Excessive Alcohol Use in Charlotte County, Florida

In Southwest Florida, Charlotte County is a desirable vacation destination with beaches, year-round warm weather, and a fast-growing population. Unfortunately, the culture in this community seems to normalize alcohol use among adults like much of the United States and the world. With alcohol embedded into celebration and relaxation rituals in the US, the public may underestimate the addictive qualities and damaging effects of alcohol. Proof of the harm to our health, behavior, and the economy is available, yet much of the public is unaware of the adverse impacts of alcohol. This community is above the national average in excessive alcohol use and deaths due to alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2024). I plan to work with individuals who have alcohol use disorder in my clinical practice as a mental health counselor, focusing on adults in my community and advocating for increased public awareness of alcohol's harmful effects in Charlotte County.

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

Excessive Alcohol Use in Charlotte County, Florida

For this project, I chose to address the excessive use of alcohol in Charlotte County, Florida. In 2020, 19% of Charlotte County adults indicated that they participated in binge or heavy drinking in the last 30 days (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2024). This percentage is higher than the 18% national and 17% Florida state average. Although local comparison data about alcohol use was not available, there is evidence that alcohol use continues to be on the rise nationally. Death certificates in the United States that mention alcohol as a cause of death rose over 25% in 2020 and 10% more in 2021 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). The rate of alcohol-related deaths per capita was already on the rise before lockdown in Florida, with rates rising by as much as 54% in the four years before 2020 (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 2024). Alcohol use continues to be a problem in Charlotte County, leading to many adverse health, social, and economic consequences.

The repercussions of excessive alcohol use are evident throughout the United States. The health consequences of alcohol are especially apparent in Charlotte County, where 30% of motor vehicle crash deaths involved alcohol in Charlotte County, much higher than the Florida state average of 22% and the national average of 26% (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2024). Not only is alcohol a causal factor in physical illnesses such as liver cirrhosis, some cancers, cardiovascular diseases, and fetal alcohol syndrome, but it also harms mental health (World Health Organization, 2024). Considering all of these factors, it is not surprising that more than 250,000 years of potential life is estimated to be lost because of alcohol use in the state of Florida (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 2024). Economic consequences of alcohol arise for many reasons, including the loss of productivity in workers, costs for the criminal

justice system, and healthcare costs. It is estimated that Florida taxpayers more than 20 billion dollars each year due to excessive alcohol use (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics).

The goal of this project is to reduce self-reported excessive alcohol use in adults above the age of 18 in Charlotte County, Florida, using prevention-based life skills programs in the local public schools, community education, and increasing availability of bilingual telehealth therapy options for individuals who are unable to attend counseling in-person.

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Excessive Alcohol Use in Charlotte County, Florida

When considering ways to prevent adults' excessive alcohol use in Charlotte County, using a social-ecological systems theory helps identify risk and protective factors. This model describes how all the factors in a person's life work are connected. The theory places the microsystem, which includes an individual's work, school, friends, neighbors, and family, as the most influential in one's development (Guy-Evans, 2020). However, we cannot discount how macrosystem components such as economic systems, culture, and social norms can influence microsystems. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) writes that risk and protective factors can be more deeply understood when viewing "the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community, and societal factors" (para 4). Although interconnected, I will address all four levels separately in the following sections.

Individual Level

Individual risk factors for adults in Charlotte County include beginning to consume alcohol at a young age, depression or other mental health challenges, and genetics (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.). The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Prevention (2020) found that when individuals, especially women, begin

drinking before age 15, they are over three times more likely to have an AUD than those who waited until they could legally drink. Dealing with mental health challenges increases the likelihood that an adult will drink excessively regardless of gender, possibly in an attempt to self-medicate (Fang & Lung, 2022). Mental health challenges may be a result of previous traumatic experiences, which can lead to alcohol abuse when not treated (National Child Traumatic Stress Network n.d.). Genetics plays an essential role in the risk of excessive alcohol use, although genetic and environmental factors combine (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.). Effective prevention plans for Charlotte County will address these individual risk factors, but will also consider protective factors.

I will consider individual protective factors such as high self-esteem, high self-control, and religiosity in this portfolio. The well-being and healthy personal growth that people with high self-esteem experience can be a protective factor, but self-esteem can be related to many factors, such as neighborhood safety (Pederson et al., 2022). Self-control is also linked as a protective factor for alcohol use, allowing individuals to set goals and display behaviors that will lead to the desired results (Niloofar et al., 2022). Finally, an individual's religiosity can play a role in decreasing the likelihood that young adults will engage in excessive alcohol use (Abbott et al., 2019). Increasing the individual protective factors for the individuals in my community will play a key role in excessive alcohol use prevention.

Relational Level

At the relational level, risk factors such as parents, family members, and peers who use alcohol frequently can increase the likelihood of excessive drinking in Charlotte County. Parental drinking not only impacts adolescents, but studies show that it continues to impact offspring alcohol use into adulthood (Sipilä et al., 2023). Parents may model pro-drinking attitudes or even

provide their children with access to alcohol, normalizing excessive drinking for future generations. Friend and family gatherings with alcohol readily available will increase excessive alcohol use due to the addictive nature of alcohol. Even in adulthood, peers can play a role in increasing alcohol use, so friendships and relationships with those who excessively drink alcohol are at risk (Keysers et al., 2020).

Although relationships among parents, family, and peers can create risk, they can also create influential protective factors for alcohol abuse as well. Parents and guardians who focus on effectively monitoring their children and are involved in their lives can lessen the amount of alcohol their children will use in the future (Longmore et al., 2022). We often associate peer pressure with adverse outcomes, but peers can potentially have a positive impact in the adolescent and early adult years (Keysers et al., 2020). When families, friends, and peers organize alcohol-free activities, excessive drinking may happen less frequently. Support of parents, family members, and peers can be a strong protective factor for excessive alcohol use.

Community Level

Community-level factors related to neighborhood violence and poverty can heighten excessive alcohol use. 15% of Charlotte County's children live in poverty, below the national average of 18% (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2024). Although these numbers seem positive, it is of note that 36% of Hispanic children are living in poverty, which is significantly higher than the averages of all other races/ethnicities (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2024). Living in a disadvantaged neighborhood can lead to stress associated with many risks, such as witnessing violence, crime, homelessness, and stress related to poverty. Segrin et al. (2023) write, "Because the person is part of the neighborhood in which he or she resides, there is undoubtedly some degree of individual-level influence built into the neighborhood effects" (p.

925). This is an instance where the social-ecological systems intersect, as community-level violence and poverty impact the individual's mental health and relationships.

Protective factors at the community level include religious activities and community resources such as after-school programs and non-alcohol-related community functions. Being part of religious institutions has been associated with beginning alcohol consumption at a later age or completely abstaining from alcohol (Lin et al., 2020). Religious associations may provide non-alcoholic community functions, but the community can also offer such resources. For example, a few "mocktail" bars have moved into nearby cities that are entirely alcohol-free and provide billiards, trivia, and karaoke. Local beaches and nature preserves are also sober-friendly. Protective factors like these can help lower alcohol consumption in my county.

Societal Level

One of the societal risk factors that could impact excessive alcohol use is the increasingly hostile environment towards sexual and gender minorities that Florida leaders and lawmakers have been creating. One example is Florida's 2022 Parental Rights in Education Act, commonly called the "Don't Say Gay" law. Sanctioning the exclusion of LGBTQ+ from the school curriculum indirectly supports the idea that these identities are sinful or wrong. Although we don't yet know the long-term consequences of this act in Charlotte County, we do know that minority stress is correlated with increased alcohol use (Goldberg et al., 2024). Other Florida legislation may have an impact on alcohol consumption, including 2021's Senate Bill 148, which allows businesses to sell alcohol "to go." Discriminatory laws and those that encourage easy access to alcohol in Florida are societal risk factors that will be considered in this portfolio.

Just as state laws can create risk factors, they may also become protective factors when they limit alcohol consumption. Evidence supports the idea that increasing the tax on alcohol and

decreasing availability may limit excessive drinking (Trangenstein et al., 2020). Raising the financial stakes and responsibility for businesses that sell to underage or drunk customers is something to consider. Passing laws such as these may help protect the public from alcohol-related accidents and the health risks associated with alcohol use at the societal level.

Conclusion

I will consider risk and protective factors at the individual, relational, community, and societal levels to create a prevention plan for the complex problem of excessive alcohol use. Using this social-ecological model can help create a deeper understanding of the root cause of a problem within the community and identify recommended actions. When considering the case of Charlotte County, it is easy to see the complex interplay of all four levels. Protective factors can mitigate the harmful effects of risk factors and will be integrated into this prevention plan.

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

Excessive Alcohol Use in Charlotte County, Florida

To address Charlotte County's excessive alcohol use in adults, one must understand the current theoretical description of this phenomenon. Despite alcohol being a powerful, addictive drug with a formidable impact on the brain, the reward may outweigh the risk for many (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Prevention, 2021). Clearly, a greater understanding of alcohol is needed for programs aimed at prevention. First, I will describe the research-based applications of Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to understand excessive alcohol use. Then, I will analyze potential programs in Charlotte County using the lens of theoretical understanding.

Social Learning Theory

Alcohol use so often begins as a social activity, so it is not surprising that one of the applicable theories is Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT). In fact, the social environment is the most substantial way to predict drug use, either incentivizing or dissuading the use of drugs, including alcohol (Smith, 2021). Research shows that one's perception of social support predicts treatment outcomes (Eslami et al., 2018). Creating positive social support systems is part of not only maintaining the motivation for alcohol-free lifestyles but also preventing excessive alcohol use. However, alcohol use can not only be viewed as the product of one's environment.

At the heart of SLT is the idea of reciprocal determinism, meaning behavior is determined by the characteristics of a person, the characteristics of their environment, and the behavior (Smith, 2021). Research supports the idea that these three factors work together for those in recovery from excessive alcohol use to avoid relapse (Brooks et al., 2019). The characteristics of the environment include the influence of mass media. With alcohol advertising, the incorporation of alcohol into television and movies, and depictions of drinking in social media, there may be positive associations with alcohol despite its addictive nature. Mayrfhofer and Naderer (2019) found that negative consequences depicted in media exposure influenced heavy drinkers to drink more. The personal characteristics of the individual also influence one's decision to use alcohol.

Personal characteristics, including the idea of self-efficacy, can impact alcohol use. Eslami et al. (2018) define the idea of self-efficacy in the case of alcohol and other drugs as "the confidence to resist substance use across different high-risk situations" (p. 301). Research has shown that high alcohol-related self-efficacy leads to low levels of relapse after recovery (Brooks et al., 2019). Indeed, self-efficacy can be cultivated with social support. Bandura's theory is

especially appropriate because it addresses personal attributes like self-efficacy and the interaction of these attributes with the environment.

Theory of Planned Behavior

Another theory to consider when determining ways to decrease excessive alcohol use is Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Bhochhibhoya and Branscum (2018) reviewed the available research regarding TPB, finding that it provides a solid conceptual framework that applies to understanding and predicting alcohol use. There is research to suggest that the intention to consume alcohol is a significant predictor of engagement in that behavior. Courtney and Russell (2023) found that those who began the day intending to drink were far more likely to consume alcohol, increasing negative consequences. Stevens et al. (2023) found that planned drinking at bars, parties, or a friend's house led to higher amounts of alcohol consumption and more harmful consequences than unplanned drinking or drinking alone. TPB is related to alcohol use because the intention to drink has an impact on outcomes.

TPB suggests that three different concepts influence whether or not someone will engage in a behavior like alcohol consumption. The first is personal attitudes, such as their belief that alcohol use is positive or negative. The second is subjective social norms surrounding the behavior, including whether or not those close to them would approve of drinking. The final is one's perception of control over behavior, including internal and external factors. All three influences are significantly correlated with engaging in excessive alcohol consumption (Lawental et al., 2018). Because of this correlation, TPB is an appropriate framework for viewing prevention.

Of great concern in Charlotte County and much of the United States is the normalization of drinking, which can increase alcohol use, according to TPB. Bhochhibhoya and Branscum

(2018) write that countries' customs and laws are different worldwide and impact the perception of how acceptable alcohol is. The culture of SW Florida includes alcohol in many celebrations, such as concerts, weddings, and nightlife near the beaches. Charlotte County even opted to lengthen the hours for packaged alcohol sales to include any hours from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m., seven days a week. The message may be that excessive alcohol is not only acceptable but is almost expected or celebrated in a way that other drugs are not.

Evidence-Based Programs

Life skills training is one evidence-based practice that provides early intervention before alcohol use becomes problematic (Laura and John Arnold Foundation, 2019). Early consumption of alcohol is an indicator of future problematic drinking, so life skills programs for adolescents are an essential consideration for prevention (Paz Castro et al., 2022). Several follow-up studies have shown that there is significant long-term usefulness of life skills training programs in preventing the use of alcohol and other drugs later in life (Weichold & Blumenthal, 2016; Giannotta & Weichold, 2016; Spoth et al., 2016). The prevention programs could take place universally in public education classrooms, are low in cost, and have research to prove their effectiveness.

Life skills training programs are in line with the concepts in both SLT and TPB. For example, the program can increase self-efficacy using the provided role-playing activities. Students have the opportunity to practice resisting pressure to consume alcohol, boosting their confidence. Students will also complete homework assignments to make decisions about their intentions to partake in substance use (Laura and John Arnold Foundation, 2019). Therefore, setting an intention to enjoy alcohol-free fellowship with friends at a young age will increase the likelihood that students will choose not to partake in consuming alcohol or other drugs. Charlotte

County could expand life skills programs and training to increase buy-in for teachers implementing the programs.

Another evidence-based practice is to offer counseling to individuals struggling with mental health or alcohol. Telemedicine may effectively reach adults who may not attend local individual or group counseling in person. Counselors could include concepts of SLT and TPB to decrease excessive alcohol use. Kruse et al. (2020) examined the effectiveness of telehealth for alcohol use disorders, finding that it was a productive and convenient way to reach members of the community who may not wish to attend in-person counseling for a multitude of reasons.

People who are afraid of the stigma, do not have transportation, or cannot find a local counselor with openings would benefit from having an online group or individual therapy. Group therapy offers an opportunity for individuals to increase their self-efficacy and may change their personal attitudes about alcohol use. Hallgren et al. (2023) conducted research, finding that telehealth counseling was a way to reach women who do not want to face the stigma of in-person AUD groups. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2021) found a lack of professionals available in more rural and spread-out areas like Charlotte County, and this need can be addressed through telehealth services. Telehealth counseling services may be particularly useful in Charlotte County, a widespread area without extensive public transportation options.

Conclusion

Charlotte County is an area where alcohol is normalized, and excessive alcohol use has become a problem. To address this issue, one must understand applicable, research-supported theories. I found ideas from Bandura's SLT and Ajzen's Theory TPB that can be applied to developing an understanding of alcohol use. These theories apply to using Life Skills Training and telehealth to prevent and treat excessive alcohol use.

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Excessive Alcohol Use in Charlotte County, Florida

I have broadly discussed excessive alcohol use in Charlotte County, but it is important to look specifically at groups that experience it at increased rates. An understanding of the causes of overrepresentation in specific communities and how prevention strategies must be adjusted to reach these groups is critical to decreasing excessive alcohol use (Reese & Vera, 2007). Culture plays a prominent role in the way a person views excessive alcohol use, other mental health struggles that may accompany it, and barriers to seeking treatment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.). Hispanic males experience excessive alcohol use at higher rates than other groups. I will analyze the impact of alcohol on this population, determine how to create culturally relevant prevention strategies, and identify ethical principles that should guide community services.

Excessive Alcohol Use in Hispanic Males

Although racial and ethnic alcohol use disparities specific to Charlotte County were not available, I can consider relevant trends across the United States. According to America's Health Rankings 2023 data, excessive drinking is more prevalent among men than women and higher among Hispanic adults than black or Asian adults. Excessive drinking in Florida is relatively low compared to other states, but I previously discussed that it is significantly higher in Charlotte County. In Florida, adult males who are 35 years of age or older are also more likely to die from excessive alcohol use (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics). Hispanic males are particularly vulnerable to alcohol use disorders.

An essential piece of data to consider specific to Charlotte County is that 36% of Hispanic children live in poverty. This percentage is more than twice as high as any other group (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018). This data is critical to consider in terms of alcohol use since there has been a correlation between SES status and alcohol abuse in Hispanic communities (Cook et al., 2020). Further stress can come from the collectivist culture of many Latin countries. Attia et al. (2023) found that culture may cause first and second-generation immigrants to feel financial obligations to extended families in their home country. Considering this, it is not surprising that SES status is associated with higher rates of alcohol abuse.

Cultural Considerations

Latino men are a rapidly growing population in the United States, so alcohol use in this community should be a public health concern for all (Balagopal et al., 2020). Considering contributing factors to alcohol use specific to Hispanic males in Charlotte County is necessary before determining culturally relevant prevention programs. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (n.d.) suggests health care professionals consider a specific community's acculturation, discrimination, family relationships, spirituality, and general outlook when deciding which services to provide. For the Hispanic community in my area, I think I will focus on the impact of discrimination/acculturation and stress associated with work conditions.

A multitude of research exists that shows a correlation between feelings of discrimination, stresses associated with acculturation, and an increase in alcohol use. For example, Kcomt et al. (2024) found that discrimination was a risk factor for Latin/Hispanic populations of all sexual orientations to develop alcohol use disorder. According to Ruiz et al. (2024), acculturation is correlated with excessive alcohol consumption and consequences. Additionally, research showed that recently immigrated Hispanic men's perceived discrimination

and acculturation were associated with higher alcohol use (Cano, 2020). Reducing discrimination and acculturative stress associated with immigration may be vital in reducing alcohol use in Latino immigrant men (Torres et al., 2024).

Another consideration for Hispanic males in Charlotte County is the impact of employment. Hispanic men who recently immigrated from Latin countries often work as day laborers under poor outdoor conditions in the southern Florida heat. Day laborers may have added stressors due to lack of housing and negative work experiences that will lead to problematic alcohol use (Atkinson et al., 2024). As mentioned earlier, the added responsibility of sending money to extended family and housing problems could increase the stress that leads to alcohol use.

Increasing Cultural Relevance of Services

Many barriers exist to prevention and intervention services. One barrier to accessing programs is the location of services. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (n.d.) suggests that intervention be looked at in terms of location, transportation, language, and relationship building. The location of prevention programs and services is an essential factor to consider. Reese and Vera (2007) write that providing services within a particular ethnic community will improve access to mental health services. Prevention programs such as LifeSkills prevention programs should be offered within a community, preferably by someone from the community.

Another barrier may be language differences. Torres et al. (2020) found that Latino immigrant men are at high risk for excessive alcohol use, suggesting interventions should be delivered in Spanish and reflect a culturally responsive way to reflect on alcohol-related behaviors. Delivering substance abuse prevention education in Spanish may be a way to increase

understanding surrounding mental health. Increasing health literacy surrounding alcohol use in Latinx communities may help reduce the stigma around receiving help for services (Washburn et al., 2023). I recommend that telehealth services be offered in Spanish if no Spanish-speaking individuals are available.

Machismo was another theme that emerged in the research about alcohol use in Hispanic men. Balagopal et al. (2022) wrote that machismo, or masculine strength and pride, was associated with both higher levels of cultural stress and more instances of alcohol use disorders. Since machismo and problem drinking are associated, Mogro-Wilson and Cifuentes (2020) suggest that a strengths-based approach that appeals to a fatherhood identity would be appropriate for Latin men who are struggling with substance abuse. Additionally, Support groups for Hispanic men in the community or online may help create social support, which can play a role in lessening drinking, especially for Latino immigrant men (Documet et al., 2019).

Ethical Considerations

An ethical consideration when working with Hispanic men, especially immigrants, is to take steps to mitigate any power dynamics. Some immigrant clients understandably feel that non-hispanic white counselors lack insight into their particular circumstances, so counselors must do everything possible to address this while establishing an alliance with their clients (Attia et al., 2023). The cultural stigma that is associated with seeing mental health professionals could lead to a fear of diagnosis of a mental disorder. The American Counseling Association's (2014) Standard E.5.b. necessitates that a counselor considers socioeconomic status and cultural experiences when diagnosing mental disorders. Again, creating an alliance that addresses the client's fears and provides an open dialogue will help establish an effective relationship so the

counselor may choose the best assessment instrument available when diagnosing mental disorders.

Another consideration is defining confidentiality when working with Hispanic males. The American Counseling Association (2014) writes in standard A.2.c that when making clients aware of privacy and confidentiality, “counselors provide necessary services (e.g., arranging for a qualified interpreter or translator) to ensure comprehension by clients” (p. 4). Counselors must see to it that clients are aware of privacy restrictions and remain sensitive to the differences in cultural meanings of confidentiality (American Counseling Association). Some clients may sign documents without understanding, perhaps because they are embarrassed to ask for clarification or have an aversion to conflict with someone in authority.

Conclusion

Hispanic males are disproportionately impacted by alcohol use disorders and the consequences that go along with them. In my community, some potential stressors that impact alcohol consumption for this group are discrimination, acculturation stress, and poor work conditions. In order to reach this community, services may be provided in Spanish and within the community setting. Therapists can address concerns about mental health stigma and power dynamics through culturally competent counseling techniques and respect for cultural factors.

PART 5: ADVOCACY

Excessive Alcohol Use in Charlotte County, Florida

At the heart of counseling is empowering clients to enact change in their lives. With this work, seeing the need for advancing social justice for neglected communities should naturally

follow. The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) were created with this idea in mind. The MSJCC comprises four domains, including the self-awareness of a counselor, the client's worldview, the relationship between the counselor and client, and counseling and advocacy interventions (The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015). The goal of this section of my project is to consider advocacy and interventions that will address the injustices associated with excessive alcohol use in Charlotte County.

Counseling advocacy can be described as acting both with and on behalf of the client (Murray & Crowe, 2016). Further, advocacy means that a counselor commits to decreasing oppression and systemic barriers that cause distress (Toporek et al., 2009). Two marginalized groups that are impacted more deeply by excessive alcohol use in Charlotte County are the LGBTQ+ community that experiences discrimination and Latinx individuals who are more likely to live in poverty in Charlotte County. Although advocacy is needed for many groups, these two groups will be the focus of this section of my paper. One must consider the barriers at several levels to ensure effective advocacy. I will explore the barriers at the institutional, community, and public policy levels in order to suggest advocacy actions that will be effective at each level.

Institutional Level

At the institutional level, barriers may impede addressing excessive alcohol use in marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ and Hispanic community members. For this level, the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015) call on counselors to address inequities within societal institutions like schools, churches, and community organizations. These organizations can provide influential protective factors, but they may not be available to members of marginalized communities.

Barriers

Barriers for LGBTQ+ community members may be finding hostility within schools and churches. Local churches such as Edgewater Church and Family Church in Port Charlotte have recovery programs for individuals who are struggling with alcohol use addiction and their families. However, this church is not LGBTQ+ friendly. Additionally, public schools have become increasingly hostile towards this community, with many states enacting policies that discriminate against transgender and non-binary students, harming their well-being (Jandernoa, 2024). Adding bullying by peers onto these discriminatory policies, schools are not the safe havens they should be within the community. Hostility towards the LGBTQ+ community is a barrier that should be addressed to improve the institutional support that could prevent excessive alcohol use.

Spanish-speaking community members have additional barriers to accessing prevention and treatment programs. The closest bilingual treatment facility for alcohol abuse is almost a two-hour drive from Charlotte County, and the nearest bilingual AA meeting is almost an hour away. Transportation to these programs, the cost of the programs, and a lack of cultural understanding of the community are barriers to treatment and prevention programs. The role of primary care doctors in educating and encouraging a decrease in alcohol use cannot be ignored. Doctors may not have an understanding of the specific needs of this community. Thus, a patient-centered model for each individual would be necessary for increasing awareness and treatment of mental health and alcohol use disorders alike (Frost et al., 2022).

Another barrier for both the Hispanic and LGBTQ+ communities involves the prevention programs available at the local public schools. The substance use prevention and education program available in the local schools, Drug-Free Charlotte County, is implemented by teachers

with little training and are not likely to be bilingual. According to Kratzke et al. (2018), non-Hispanic students showed significantly higher skills in health advocacy and awareness of services than Hispanic students, so culturally relevant prevention programs are crucial for Hispanic students. A lack of bilingual, culturally appropriate programs in school and community treatment programs is a barrier to reaching this marginalized community. With the lack of support for LGBTQ+ students in the schools, it is unlikely that prevention programs will offer the type of support that students need.

Advocacy

My advocacy at the institutional level would include finding and supporting local spiritual and religious institutions that can help reach marginalized clients in the LGBTQ+ community. For example, churches such as the Congregational United Church of Christ of Punta Gorda and the Unitarian Universalist of Port Charlotte are LGBTQ+ friendly and specifically work for social justice. Research shows that regular religious service attendance increases health and happiness for many members of the LGBTQ+ community (Heath & Keene, 2023; Huffman et al., 2020). These churches or other local organizations may be willing to work towards alcohol prevention programs that include and welcome all.

The need for connection to a spiritual community may be a way to support and advocate for the Hispanic community. Nogueira and Schmidt (2022) found that faith-based mental health awareness and literacy programs were particularly effective in reaching the Latinx community. This information could be brought to faith-based institutions so they may partner with mental health advocates and professionals to provide something similar in my area. Increasing protective factors will have a positive impact on the community, reducing the need for unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol use. Spirituality is a crucial component of human identity, so

focusing on connections to local churches is a natural way to advocate for the needs of marginalized groups.

Community Level

At the community level, barriers exist that cause LGBTQ+ and Hispanic community members to be disproportionately impacted by excessive alcohol use. According to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015), counselors must examine how norms and values hinder marginalized groups in the community. Advocacy at the community level can help decrease unhealthy alcohol use.

Barriers

In the Hispanic community, several barriers exist to preventing excessive alcohol use. Perhaps the most critical barrier to address is the higher incidence of mental health stigma surrounding help-seeking behavior that could decrease problematic behaviors such as alcohol use (Wong et al., 2018). Research has consistently shown that there is a deeply ingrained cultural stigma within the Latino community that is likely a barrier to receiving mental health treatment (Hood, 2023). Not engaging in alcohol use or seeking treatment may impact family opinions of an individual. The fear of losing familial support or causing conflict is higher within the Hispanic community, and family conflict can result in higher alcohol use (Dixon et al., 2020).

The wide acceptance and availability of alcohol in the local community can also create a barrier to decreasing its excessive use. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2022) found that communities of higher poverty and more significant numbers of Hispanic/Latino populations have greater alcohol outlet densities in the United States. In Charlotte County, many social activities revolve around alcohol, including concerts/music festivals, karaoke competitions at local bars, and line dancing at a popular local restaurant.

The climate of hostility in Florida towards the LGBTQ+ community is evident in Charlotte County. Loneliness for sexual minorities in the southeastern United States can be a barrier to addressing excessive alcohol use and other mental health issues (Shepp et al., 2023). A lack of identity affirmation in mental health treatment, negative previous experiences in help-seeking, and harassment and discrimination within the community can all create barriers to decreasing alcohol use.

Advocacy

I would focus on partnering with community organizers to create opportunities for social activities that do not revolve around alcohol. A lack of support from family and friends can be mitigated if a person has access to community support, creating a higher sense of mental well-being (Farhoudian et al., 2022). Community leaders could play a role in creating ways to decrease the amount of alcohol at events taking place at the fairgrounds, bars, and music venues. Creating alcohol-free karaoke events at local venues, encouraging venues to limit or have alcohol-free nights, and having alcohol-free live music venues would increase a sense of belongingness and decrease excessive alcohol use in Charlotte County.

Public Policy Level

Finally, barriers exist at the public policy level that can be addressed through advocacy. Public policies can be powerful tools for decreasing alcohol use, and changes are needed in Charlotte County. Public policies can decrease alcohol use and have proven to do so. Nevertheless, slack public policies regarding alcohol use are currently creating barriers to improving public health. The alcohol industry's efforts to increase its agenda at the expense of the health of Americans have been present in the United States for years (Lesch &

McCambridge, 2023). Looking at Public Policy in Port Charlotte is a key consideration for decreasing excessive alcohol use.

Barriers

Several barriers exist at the public policy level. Limiting the hours of allowable alcohol sales has been shown to reduce alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harms (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2022). Despite this information, Charlotte County has opted to increase the hours of alcohol sales, making alcohol available during the maximum allowable hours according to Florida law. Since the COVID-19 epidemic, Charlotte County opted to continue the new "to-go" alcohol sales policies, making it easier to excessively drink and drive. Finally, raising alcohol taxes is another practice that has been proven to reduce drinking. However, with studies showing that these taxes primarily affect White, college-educated men, there have been push-backs from lawmakers (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2022). Public policy seems to prioritize the comfort of privileged groups and increasing alcohol industry sales over decreasing problematic alcohol use.

Advocacy

Prevention must be centered around increasing public awareness about how addictive and damaging alcohol is to our bodies. Although alcohol is a known carcinogen, there has been little done to increase awareness. Many people are still unaware of the association between alcohol and cancer, mistakenly believing that alcohol is good for the heart (Seidenberg, 2022). I plan to advocate for mental health professionals to collaborate with county decision-makers to ensure that accurate information is being disseminated locally due to the high rate of excessive alcohol use in our area. Accurate, research-based evidence can be presented through social media, advertising, or school-based programs.

Conclusion

As a white, cis-gendered counselor in training, I am not naive to the status of privilege I hold. Researching Charlotte County's barriers helped me better understand how to advocate for marginalized groups. The thread that runs through advocacy strategies on all levels is collaboration. Finding organizations that will welcome and affirm the identities of marginalized groups will allow me to serve as a resource for connection. While working alone, I can make a difference in the lives of my clients, but when partnering with organizations I can impact my community on a larger scale.

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