

The Challenge of Multiculturalism: The Road Less Traveled

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A renowned scholar of multiculturalism proposes picturing the United States as a cultural mosaic rather than a melting pot. He calls on counselors of minority clients to take the road less traveled: to rise above racism, embrace ethnic diversity, and employ varied intervention strategies so the needs of culturally different clients can be met.

Several years ago I heard an interesting tale from a Nigerian counselor who was attending one of my multicultural counseling workshops. The tale, often told to Nigerian children, goes something like this.

A white female elementary school teacher in the United States posed a math problem to her class one day. “Suppose there are four blackbirds sitting in a tree. You take a slingshot and shoot one of them. How many are left?” A white student answered quickly, “That’s easy, One subtracted from four is three.” An African immigrant youth then answered with equal confidence, “Zero.” The teacher chuckled at the latter response and stated that the first student was right and that, perhaps, the second student should study more math. From that day forth, the African student seemed to withdraw from class activities and seldom spoke to other students or the teacher.

This story gets to the heart of some fundamental issues confronting the multicultural movement in the United States. If the teacher had pursued the African student’s reasons for arriving at the answer zero, she might have heard the following, “If you shoot one bird, the others will fly away.” Nigerian educators often use this story to illustrate differences in world views between United States and African cultures.

The Nigerians contend that the group is more important than the individual, that survival of all depends on interrelationships among the parts, and that individualism should be de-emphasized for the good of the whole. The fact that the white child arrived at a different answer may suggest a world view or belief that the psychosocial unit of operation is the individual, that rugged individualism should be

valued, and that autonomy of the parts and independence of action are more significant than group conformance.

From the perspective of most teachers in this country, the white student was correct and the African student was wrong. The problem posed by the teacher represents a hypothetical (abstract) situation that requires a literal (task) answer. Our educational system reflects a world view that values linear,

analytical, empirical, and task solutions. The African child, however, may have a totally different cultural perspective. To the African student, birds have a relationship with one another with known behavior that could be expected to occur when one is shot. Solutions to the problem are based on understanding holistic relationships in the real (not hypothetical) world; and experiential reality is given equal, if not greater, weight than the empirical task being posed.

The multicultural movement in the United States is forcing each and every one of us to consider the cultural perspectives of the many diverse groups in our society. The Nigerian story illustrates several important lessons about multiculturalism. First, there may be no right or wrong answer. Indeed, both students are correct depending on the cultural perspective of each. Second, there is often more than one answer to a problem and, perhaps, more than one way to arrive at the solution. Last, it is clear from this example that a failure to understand or to accept another world view can have detrimental consequences. In this case, the culturally different child may have been made to feel invalidated, to feel inferior, and to feel that being different is unacceptable. When operating in this manner, education and counseling may represent forms of cultural oppression.

Counseling at the Crossroads

I believe that our society, in general, and the counseling profession, in particular,

stand at the crossroads of a major choice. One road, monoculturalism/ethnocentrism, is the road we have always traveled. It is the road that traditionally has emphasized the "melting pot" concept and the belief that Western European cultures are superior to all other cultures. It also is the road that gave birth to our traditional theories of counseling and psychotherapy, to white definitions of normality and abnormality, and to the belief that differences are unacceptable.

Mono-culturalism and ethnocentrism have sparked the structures, policies, and practices of our present institutions. Many monocultural norms are strongly embedded in our organizations and dictate a narrow band of acceptable values and behaviors that have been detrimental to minority constituents. Ethnocentrism is a road that many white majority people have followed successfully because the rules have been based primarily on their own homogeneous culture. It is a road that has served many well and continues to make them feel most comfortable and secure.

The other path, multiculturalism, is the road less traveled. It recognizes and values diversity. It values cultural pluralism and acknowledges our nation as a cultural mosaic rather than a melting pot. It is the road that challenges us to stay multiple cultures, to develop multiple perspectives, and to teach our children how to integrate broad and conflicting bodies of

information to arrive at sound judgments.

Multiculturalism challenges us to shed our ethnocentric perspective. It is through this route that we begin the process of developing new structures, policies, and practices that are more responsive to all groups, regardless of race, creed, color, national origin, sexual orientation, and gender.

For counseling professionals, the road less traveled is not an easy one to choose. It is filled with many difficulties, uncertainties, and demands for change on our part and on the part of our institutions. Yet, demographic realities do not allow us to delay our decision. The ever richer cast of visible racial and ethnic minorities is a major influence transforming the makeup of our country. The complexion of the United States is changing at a rate unmatched in our history. The 1990 census revealed that, within the next 20 years, racial and ethnic minorities will become a numerical majority, while white Americans will constitute only about 48 percent of the population.

Increasing U. S. Diversification

The diversification of the United States is due primarily to two trends. First, the current immigration rates (immigrants, undocumented immigrants, and refugees) are the largest in this country's history. Approximately 34 percent of the entire immigration group is Asian; another 34 percent is Latino. Unlike their early European counterparts, these two

groups are not necessarily oriented toward assimilation (the melting pot process); they may often prefer to retain their cultural heritage. They are bicultural. This does not mean that they are adverse to incorporating the values of a larger society.

The second trend prompting diversification is the aging of the white American population and the declining fertility and birth rate (1.7 children per mother). This is in marked contrast to the much higher rates of birth for minority groups. For African Americans the rate is 2.4 children per mother, for Mexican Americans it's 2.9, for the Vietnamese it's 3.4 and it's 11.9 for the Hmongs.

The implications associated with the dramatic increase of the nonwhite population are immense. For example, we know that 75 percent of the entering labor force is now composed of racial and ethnic minorities and women; that by the time the so-called baby boomers retire, the majority of contributors to social security and pension plans will be minorities; and that our educational and mental health systems will be the first to feel the impact of these population changes. Already in many states, such as California, the number of white students has dropped below 50 percent. Many students live in a home where English is not spoken, and a high percentage are born outside of this country.

Business and industry must value and learn to manage a diverse work force to remain competitive and survive. Likewise, if the counseling and teaching

professions are to survive, we will need to deliver culturally appropriate services to a diverse population.

As a society, we can no longer deny equal access and opportunities to our minority citizens. We can no longer maintain a large undereducated, under trained, and underprivileged group in the United States. Since minorities and women represent a disproportionate share of this group, the implications are frightening. Today's under trained minority youth may be the worker contributing to our retirement fund. Today's undereducated youth may be the future teacher of our children.

Many of us are beginning to realize the importance of infusing multicultural concepts into our classrooms. Many of us are also recognizing that traditional forms of counseling and psychotherapy may be inappropriate in application to minority groups. We see that the multicultural counseling movement represents a healthy, viable future for our profession. To join this movement, however, we must surmount several difficulties.

As counselors, we must become more culturally aware of our values, biases, stereotypes, and assumptions about human behavior. What are the world views we bring to the counseling encounter? Without this awareness and understanding, we may inadvertently assume that everyone shares our world view. When this happens, we may become guilty of cultural oppression, imposing

values on the culturally different client.

It is also important for us to acquire knowledge and understanding of the world view of minority clients. What are their values, biases, and assumptions about human behavior? How are they similar or dissimilar to that of the helping professional?

Finally, we need to begin using culturally appropriate intervention strategies. This involves developing individual counseling and communication skills and systems intervention skills. It also involves using intrinsic helping approaches of culturally diverse groups.

Raising Our Awareness

I have been criticized occasionally for emphasizing the sociopolitical aspects of counseling "too much" and for seeming to put an inordinate amount of emphasis on racism as a major barrier to effective multicultural counseling. Yet, I am convinced that one of the biggest obstacles to the multicultural path is racism. I believe that counseling and psychotherapy have often been used as instruments of oppression, handmaidens of the status quo, and transmitters of society's values. Historical and current examples are numerous; suffice it to say that traditional counseling has done great harm to many racial and ethnic minorities.

White counselors need to realize that they are not immune from inheriting the racial biases of their forebears. Spike Lee, the producer and director of the films *Do The Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever*, has created

quite a fervor with his statement that “All whites are racist.” Such a statement usually arouses denial, anger, defensiveness, guilt, or feelings of helplessness in white counselors and trainees. These reactions, unless adequately resolved, inevitably block effective multicultural counseling.

None of us was born wanting to be biased or bigoted or to hold stereotypes. None of us was born wanting to be a racist. Yet we are racist, and the fact that we are not directly responsible for our socialization experiences and upbringing does not absolve us from the responsibility of dealing with personal and societal racism.

When my graduate students ask whether I believe that whites are racist, I usually respond with a qualified, “yes.” This answer evokes many different reactions, just as you may be experiencing right now. However, my answer is not tinged with anger, bitterness, blame, or negativism. I believe it to be an honest one, and I hope others will answer it honestly as well. Until each and every one of us confronts our biases, we will not make major progress in race relations. That’s why cross cultural training needs to have a strong antiracism component. Otherwise, it may be doomed to failure. Cross-cultural counselor training is more than cognitive understanding and awareness. If it were not, we would have eradicated racism years ago.

Minorities can be biased, can be discriminating, and can hold stereotypes as well. To believe that I have been

born and raised as a Chinese American in this society for some 49 years without inheriting detrimental attitudes, beliefs, and feelings toward other groups would be the height of arrogance or naivete. However, I agree with James Jones’s definition of racism. It is the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one group’s cultural heritage over another, and the possession of power to impose those standards broadly upon the less powerful group. Since minorities, in general, do not possess a share of economic, social, and political power equal to that of whites in our society, they are by definition unable to be racist. I realize, however, that discrimination, stereotyping, and oppression hurt and injure, regardless of whether or not we define it as racism.

We must not allow our personal biases, values, or hang-ups to interfere with our ability to work with culturally different clients. Our tendency to minimize racism, to deny it in ourselves, to avoid thinking about it, and to excuse ourselves for having it are major obstacles to effective cross-cultural counseling. Rather than confront our biases, we often take the easier route: dealing with cognitive understanding of our own cultural heritage, of the culture bound values we hold about human behavior, and of our standards for judging normality and abnormality. But we must change our route. We cannot let fear of discovering and owning up to our prejudices and biases block us from the multicultural path.

Accepting Other World Views

Just as the teacher failed to understand the world view of the African student answering the black bird problem, counselors may fail to understand the world views of their culturally different clients. Lack of understanding may lead to erroneous interpretations, judgments, and conclusions. For example, many counselors tend to emphasize the need for verbal, emotional, and behavioral expressiveness. Yet, all of these values, often manifested in the counseling process, can clash with the cultural values or behaviors of various racial and ethnic minorities.

In traditional Japanese culture, children have been taught not to speak until addressed. Patterns of communication tend to be vertical, flowing from those of higher prestige and status to those of lower prestige and status. Likewise, there are many cultural groups in which restraint of strong feelings is highly valued; it is equated with wisdom and maturity. Unfortunately, an unenlightened counselor may perceive a client practicing restraint as being inarticulate, less intelligent, inhibited, lacking in spontaneity, or repressed.

Besides understanding the cultural perspectives of a client, counselors must realize that the world views of minority groups may be strongly influenced by experiences of racism and discrimination. Minority clients oftentimes enter counseling with a healthy suspicion of the counselor, the counseling process, and

the institutions in which the process is embedded. These clients are likely to approach the counselor with serious doubts. Although they rarely express these doubts, minority clients have disturbing questions on their minds about the counselor: What makes you any different from all the others out there? How open and honest are you about your own racism, and will it interfere with our ability to work together? Can I trust you? These questions should not be viewed as pathological, but as healthy, functional mechanisms used by the culturally different to survive in an oppressive environment.

A counselor frequently is viewed as a symbol of the oppressive institution. To personalize such challenges or to consider them attacks and become defensive only hurts the counselor's credibility and effectiveness. It is important not to be intimidated by the anger; usually, the anger is not personal and is legitimate. Counselors who take a non-defensive posture are better able to aid clients in exploring issues and problems.

To understand the world view of a minority client, counselors must learn about the client's culture and about how the sociopolitical system in the United States operates with respect to its treatment of minorities. Along with this understanding, counselors must have a clear and explicit knowledge of the characteristics of counseling that may be both culture-bound and class-bound. The greater the depth of knowledge of our culturally

diverse groups and the more knowledge we have of many groups, the more likely we are to be effective helpers.

Effective Multicultural Intervention Strategies

Multicultural counseling effectiveness is enhanced when the counselor uses methods and strategies and defines goals consistent with the life experiences and culture values of the client. Yet, our training programs continue to foster the belief that certain theoretical approaches may be equally effective with all groups. When I went through graduate training, there were many covert and overt pressures from professors and fellow students to adopt a particular orientation. The pressure still exists today. Even licensing committees that administer oral exams look with suspicion on candidates who claim to be eclectic.

Being involved in the multicultural field has expanded my awareness of the multiplicity of ways in which helping or counseling is conducted. When I was younger I would proudly announce that I was "behavioral in orientation." I no longer view statements by students or counselors that "I'm Rogerian," "I'm Gestalt," or "I'm RET" as necessarily positive. Statements like that make me wonder whether the person believes that Rogerian, Gestalt, and RET methods and ways of conceptualizing can be applied to all groups with equal effectiveness.

If that is what they believe, then they are certainly mistaken. Cross-cultural training recognizes

that we are not only thinking, feeling, behaving, and social beings but cultural and political ones as well. The problem with traditional theories is that they are culture-bound and often recognize and treat only one aspect of the human condition: the thinking self, the feeling self, the behaving self, or the social self. Few include the totality of the human experience, and few include the cultural and political self.

Thus, what I am advocating is cultural flexibility in the helping process. Evidence continues to accumulate, for instance, that economically and educationally disadvantaged clients may not be oriented toward "talk therapies," that self-disclosure in counseling may be incompatible with cultural values of Asian Americans, Latinos, and American Indians, that the sociopolitical atmosphere may dictate against working openly with the counselor, and that some minority clients may benefit more from the counselor's active intervention in the system.

It is ironic that, in counseling, equal treatment may be discriminatory treatment. And differential treatment is not necessarily preferential. Minority groups want and need equal access and opportunities, which may dictate differential treatment. For instance, using SAT or GRE cutoff scores for all groups might discriminate against certain ones, even though all are treated equally. Using insight-oriented approaches in counseling might mean treating everyone the same, but such

approaches deny equal access to relevant help.

Counselors must be able to shift their counseling styles to meet not just the developmental needs of their clients but also the cultural dimensions. There has to be a recognition that no one style of counseling—theory or school—is appropriate for all populations and situations. A training program that is oriented primarily toward a single theoretical approach may be doing a great disservice to its trainees. The counseling goals and processes espoused by the theory may be antagonistic to those held by culturally different groups.

Do The Right Thing

A colleague of mine who recently passed away once shared with me his thoughts and feelings about multiculturalism. “I get so tired and depressed about constantly justifying the need for a multicultural perspective in psychology,” he said. “I warn counselors about the changing demographics about the monocultural nature of therapy, about the psychological harm imposed on minority groups and about the loss of economic competitiveness in our society. Why can’t people value diversity because it is the right thing to do?!”

Doing the right thing—embracing multiculturalism—is not easy. Yet it is the only viable option we have. Increasingly, working with minority constituents will become the norm rather than the exception. We can no longer afford to treat

multiculturalism as an ancillary, rather than an integral, part of counseling. If we truly believe that multiculturalism is intrinsic and crucial for our nation, then mono-culturalism and ethnocentrism should be seen as forms of maladjustment in a pluralistic society.

Are we up to the challenge of multiculturalism? Will we choose the road less traveled? Or will we one day look back and echo the words of poet John Greenleaf Whittier, who wrote, “For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: It might have been!”