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What Does It Mean to Be a Culturally-Competent Counselor?

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Abstract

Changing demographics require human service workers to become more multiculturally competent. Using the multicultural counseling competencies as a foundation, the presenters outlined strategies to develop competencies within the awareness, knowledge and skill domains of multicultural competence. The authors propose implications for improving advocacy for multicultural social justice.

Keywords: multicultural competence, social justice, diversity, cross-cultural, counselors

The continued growth in the number of individuals and families from diverse backgrounds challenges counselors' ability to meet the needs of a growing and diverse society. In 1994, Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis published what has become known as the multicultural counseling competencies framework. These competencies provide a foundation for all counselors to focus on both the cultural make-up of the counselor and client and how culture impacts daily living in a growing diverse society. Cannon (2008) reported that the changing demographics of the

United States population demand that counselor education programs provide training experiences that facilitate the development of multiculturally competent counselors. The growing population of diverse individuals in the United States will put more pressure on counselors to be culturally competent in their service delivery.

During the American Counseling Association (ACA) 2010 Conference, the Multicultural Social Justice Leadership Development Academy (MSJLDA) was held with the purpose of opening a dialogue about the many issues concerning multicultural competence and social justice advocacy. The authors of this article presented information about the development of multicultural competence and offered suggestions to help participants improve their applications of multicultural competence. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of each presenter's perspective on multicultural competence, to share the observations of the participants, to reflect upon the observations of the presenters and participants, and to provide a discussion of further direction regarding the area of multicultural competence applications.

What is Multicultural Competence?

The definition of multicultural competence means in part to approach the counseling process from the context of the personal culture of the client (Sue, Arrendondo & McDavis, 1994; Sue & Sue, 2007). Professional ethics compel counselors to ensure that their cultural values and biases do not override those of the client (ACA, 2005). The presenters shared personal examples of their individual cultures and how these impacted their personal and professional lives, including their professional self-awareness, knowledge, and skills. They also embodied several variables of discrimination. For example, one of the presenters, who is an immigrant from India, represented the personal experiences of sexism as a woman. The second presenter, an African American male, raised in the United States, represented racism, as it continues to affect how society views people of color (Lodge, 2010). The third presenter, a woman of multiple heritages, represented a group that receives less attention from counselors and offered a self-assessment tool to determine their individual competence as a socially just multicultural counselor. She also presented a theory to help unlink one's personal ego from functioning in the role of multicultural counselor. Participants were also invited to remain positive by substituting *and* for *but* in conversations. The final presenter, a male with multiple heritages, submitted written materials for the participants focusing the discussion on the development of multiculturally competent leaders.

These materials, based on the multicultural competence as adopted by the American Counseling Association (ACA) and the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) in 1992, focused on the development of multicultural competence in professional counseling organizations. The perspectives of the presenters and participants are presented as a means of extending the dialogue.

Modeling Competencies

In the spirit of collaboration, the presenters discussed their unique contributions to their particular topic, and their goals and objectives. This spirit of collaboration was an integral part of the social justice academy session and gave form to this article. The presenters demonstrated the power that comes from working together by forming a dynamic team.

During the presentations, participants made note of their thoughts, ideas, and questions. They shared these thoughts and ideas with each other and other participants as well. The presenters also had participants write down strategies they would recommend for Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ) to implement/initiate during the coming year. The strategies were intended to help create an agenda to improve multicultural competence within the counseling profession around issues of social justice. At the conclusion of the presentation, participants joined a discussion focusing on the development of possible CSJ initiatives.

Overview of Facilitators' Presentations

Barriers and Challenges to Becoming a Multicultural Counselor

During this part of the session, the first presenter pointed out that the need for cultural competence became more evident during the 20th century when the American population tripled. This rapid growth was partially due to a rise in immigration (Urban & Orbe, 2010) and the birth rates of racial/ethnic groups currently present in U.S. communities. The focus of this presentation was on the barriers and the challenges faced by counselors who belong to a minority community. The first presenter, an immigrant from India, shared information about her culture and about India, and their traditions, cultural beliefs and values. The presenter made efforts to educate the audience about her culture of origin and the culture she transitioned into. She talked about her growth and struggles in becoming a multicultural competent counselor within the boundaries of the U.S.

Presenters' reflections. The first presenter described her experience of cultural shock and her feelings of inadequacy. The challenges and struggles indicated that she was not adequately prepared to assimilate into the new White culture. She vehemently sought to consult colleagues, books, and research literature. She pointed out that, while there has been a strong focus on the challenges faced by counselors with clients who come from ethnic backgrounds different than the counselor's, there is less focus on the challenges that a minority counselor faces in meeting the needs of clients' who are culturally different (Consoli, Kim, & Meyer, 2008).

The presenter believed that the challenges and barriers to multicultural counseling competence are multiple. According to Pedersen (1997), the main features of cultural competence are counselor self-awareness, knowledge about culture, and skills. This belief is consistent with the multicultural counseling competencies developed by Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1994). The presenter believed that to become culturally competent, it is imperative to have *cultural knowledge*. Cultural knowledge was perceived as a coalition of theoretical concepts and life experiences (Kiselica & Maben, 1999). Therefore, the presenter made genuine efforts to integrate her knowledge of culture and life experiences in India and United States. The knowledge about two cultures and the experiences in living in both cultures provided scope for reflection and promoted counselor self-awareness.

The presenter believed the next important ingredient for multicultural competence was *cultural skills*. A skilled counselor utilizes the interventions that are client based and which serve clients needs (Chung & Bemak, 2002). The presenter discussed the significance of updating knowledge about various counseling techniques, becoming more knowledgeable about the indications and contraindications of the techniques, and emphasized the significance of establishing collaborative relationships between the counselor and the client. In multicultural counseling, the

counselor and the client need to discuss techniques that will be beneficial to the client. While adhering to the counseling norms and ethical practices, in multicultural counseling, the counselor needs to be more aware his or her limitations in counseling skills. It is vital to have cultural skills in order to serve multicultural populations in the most productive way to facilitate rapport.

By being culturally aware and recognizing how culture will affect the counseling process, this cultural awareness will support the counselor in developing an *empathic understanding* towards clients (Pedersen, 1991). Furthermore, Ridley (as cited in Chi-Ying & Bemak, 2002) stressed the importance of empathic understanding. Ridley further added that when counselors exercise their multicultural counseling skills with their clients, it is imperative to provide them with guidelines. The presenter strongly believed and adhered to the guidelines, which stressed self-experiences, self-awareness, and knowledge of culture. Cross-cultural awareness facilitates the counselor's knowledge, understanding, and respect for culturally diverse clientele (Fukuyama & Neimeyer, 1985).

Training in cultural competence can facilitate self-awareness. While being cognizant of her own culture, beliefs, and values, the presenter reminded the audience that it is crucial that counselors do not become culturally encapsulated. Cultural encapsulation puts counselors at risk of using stereotypes, becoming judgmental, and imposing their values on their clients.

This first presenter arrived in the United States during the developmental stage that Erikson (Erikson, 1993) categorized as *middle age: generativity vs. stagnation*, and began her transition from her parent culture by assimilating to a new culture. Counselors are encouraged to respect and accept their clients and their life styles, receiving them as who they are, non-judgmentally. However, immigrant counselors are faced with many challenges. They must first educate themselves about the new culture, and learn more about their beliefs and values of the people around them. Counselors might need to ask clients to educate them about their cultures. It is especially important for counselors to establish trust with clients and to demonstrate unconditional positive regard.

Perception of Other Groups

According to the presenter, stereotypes, perceptions, and beliefs that counselors hold concerning groups that are culturally different could hinder their ability to form helpful and effective relationships. Collaborative relationships might be difficult to form in the presence of such hindrances. Counselor educators must prepare counselors to become culturally competent through (a) revamping training programs, (b) developing multicultural competencies as core standards for the profession, and (c) providing continuing education for current service providers.

She added that a culturally competent counselor does not see her or his group's cultural heritage, history, values, language, traditions, arts/crafts, as superior to that of others. A culturally competent counselor is open to the values, norms, and cultural heritage of clients and does not impose her or his values/beliefs on clients (Sue & Sue, 2007). Perceiving clients from other cultures in a negative way might lead clients to believe that the counselor is superior to them, impairing the collaborative relationship between the counselor and the client. A sincere effort must be made by counselors to remove the 'invisible veil' (Sue, 2004); people are all

products of cultural conditioning and their values and beliefs (worldview) represent the "invisible veil" (Sue, 2004), which operates outside the level of consciousness. As a result, people assume that the nature of reality and truth is shared by everyone regardless of race, culture, ethnicity or gender. This universal assumption is erroneous, but it is seldom questioned because it is firmly ingrained in the individual's worldview. Counselors must make a sincere effort to remove the "invisible veil" (Sue, 2004.).

Qualities of a Multicultural Counselor

The presenter indicated that there are several qualities of a multiculturally competent counselor. First, there is *credibility*, which may be defined as the constellation of characteristics that makes one appear worthy of belief, capable, entitled to confidence, reliable, and trustworthy. Second, there is *expertness*, which depends on how well-informed, capable or intelligent others perceive the communicator. Finally, there is *trustworthiness*, which is dependent on the degree to which clients perceive the counselor to make valid assertions. These qualities could help counselors convey to their clients their multicultural social justice competence.

How Can You Provide Validation for Others and Gain It for Yourself?

In the context of multicultural counseling, validation can mean confirming what another person says. It can also mean having respect for what another person communicates by explicitly acknowledging the experiences, opinion, and thoughts of that person as legitimate. These definitions describe validation as an affirming and confirming action, but convey nothing about being right or wrong. There are many ways to use validation with clients, and let them know we respect what they are saying.

Validation is vital to gaining respect and increasing the therapeutic alliance between human service professionals and their clients. When clients affirm that the validation process is working, human service workers also feel validated for their efforts to positively connect with clients' lives, feelings, struggles, and thoughts. The validation process is viewed as a way of assisting clients to help counselors gain confidence and growth through the client's verbal or non-verbal communication of "a job well-done" (Wilson, 2006). It may be less complicated to validate situations and people who are similar to ourselves (Gamez, 2009a; 2009b), but validation has nothing to do with agreeing with others, just letting others know that what they have conveyed has meaning.

In reviewing outcome studies of ethnic and racial minorities in the human services, it becomes clear that there are many reasons why disparities exist. One reason we have disparities with some racial and ethnic minorities spending less time in psychotherapy, for example, is the lack of validation by European American human service workers. Perhaps outcomes would improve if human service workers learned how to employ the awareness, knowledge and skills of the multicultural competencies. It is also important to apply the multicultural competencies when social justice issues arise. In fact, there were several comments made during the presentation that alluded to the fact many people do not react to situations that are damaging to clients and peers alike because of the following reasons: (a) fear of isolation, (b) not knowing what to do to advocate, and (c) a fear of lost wages, job, or both.

Evaluating and Expanding Multicultural Competencies

The second presenter emphasized counselor competencies and invited attendees to identify various competencies. These competencies were then grouped into themes. Several themes were identified and the themes were: discrimination, validation, multicultural competence, and the sharing of knowledge. Each of these themes is discussed below:

Discrimination. According to the participants, overt discrimination has diminished; however, it has been replaced by a more subtle discrimination called *microaggression* that was hard to deal with. Microaggressions are insults to people who are not in the "dominant" group (Constantine, 2007). Microaggressions are many times unconscious. It is vital that we work together as a profession and professionals to spearhead community change designed to eliminate this in our society.

Mental health professionals often have to address microaggression in our advocacy work in our communities. Helping non-diverse communities to become more open and embracing of difference and supportive of change can be challenging, but is essential. Reducing microaggression is a collective responsibility of counseling professionals. Counseling professionals might better address social environmental issues such as sexism and racism that bring many clients to counseling by increasing public awareness and by changing work cultures to be more inclusive.

Validation. The second theme that emerged was *validation*. When people do not feel validated in their workplaces, they struggle with low levels of self-confidence; this low self-confidence negatively impacts the counseling process as well as their personal lives. Learning to become more multiculturally competent is an active process; it requires less lecture and more active involvement in the learning process. It requires collaboration and teamwork. Counselors' validation of clients' feelings and perceptions will benefit client's self-efficacy and self-confidence (Cormier, Nurius, & Osburn, 2009).

Multicultural competence. The third theme that emerged was *multiculturally competent* counselors. These counselors are culturally self-aware, aware of the client's culture, and willing to bring culture into the discussion during interactions with clients (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1994). Counselors are open to listening to and helping clients with goals and objectives without imposing their own cultural values on clients, are respectful in the counselor-client relationship and of the client's uniqueness, and meet clients where they are and go on the journey with their clients, providing clients with the assistance they seek. Multiculturally competent counselors do not judge clients by their own values or their own core cultural beliefs, and do not engage in negative stereotyping. Being multiculturally competent is an ongoing process; it is having the awareness that none of us ever knows everything there is to know, so we are always engaged in becoming more competent; according to the participants, it is about being a true advocate for our client.

Sharing of knowledge. The fourth theme was knowledge sharing. Participants engaged in a discussion concerning how the presentations helped many prepare to teach their peers and students about the importance of multicultural competence for counselors. Participants also stated that they were more willing to stand up to their colleagues and to speak out against microaggression. The session helped participants ask important questions about why some

people hesitate to take a stand, allowing subtle aggressions to continue. The discussion introduced the idea that much work is needed to encourage more therapists and counselors to become more open-minded in their professional and personal lives. Validating justice and speaking out against injustice is about affirming and confirming action, not about being right or wrong. Participants spoke of the importance of both self and other awareness, and addressed approaching this growing process in an experiential manner.

The second presenter shared some of his thoughts with the participants. To become a truly multiculturally competent counselor means counselors want to help all human kind. To do so, counselors must challenge the "I" centeredness of their society and the assumptions or myths learned in order to breed fear and a sense of self-preservation over others, and assert regard and respect for all mankind. In addition to more traditional tools and activities, technology offers counselors new and exciting ways to challenge their centeredness. To succeed, counselors must increase communication and decrease isolation. Counselors must learn about one another and adopt a more global focus. Counselors must seek to become sensitive to and help our clients become aware of family, work, and community differences, and factor these in their decision-making. Counselors must develop the ability to hear and understand the basis for client goals, their values and concerns, and offer alternatives in a way that supports and respects clients' cultural values. We must learn to speak in the language of the listener. We must help clients engage their significant others, family, friends and colleagues alike in more constructive conversations. We must be as concerned with the wellness of our environment (e.g., as we are with our own well-being). We must ask open-ended questions; reflective questions about traditions, spiritual centering and other aspects of our own as well as our clients' personal cultures up front, in order to help our clients focus on issues and solutions in relationship to their culture.

Promoting the Balance of Power and Mutual Respect

The second presenter further went on to say that if we are to look at the future of counseling from a multicultural and social justice perspective, it is important that we open our eyes to the many different perspectives held by the diverse peoples in our society. We must all be willing to see the world from the view of those who are different and have insight into how we view the world from our own phenomenological perspective. Using the multicultural counseling competencies (Sue et al., 1994), counselors can look at themselves and then begin to see and understand the worldviews of those who see things differently. Arredondo et al. (1996) operationalized the multicultural counseling competencies so that counselors could learn about themselves and their diverse clients in the areas of attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, and skills. Applying this knowledge throughout the American Counseling Association (and each of its divisions) is important if we are to develop counselors who are multiculturally competent and oriented toward social justice.

Attitudes and beliefs. The second presenter invited counselors and each of the ACA divisions to take a look inside themselves and gain insight into how their political views affect their attitudes and beliefs about those who are similar to them and those who are different. Counselors must then become open to having leaders in ACA and each division that represent the diverse viewpoints held as it relates politically and in the definition of social action. No one viewpoint can serve as the dominant view because counselors potentially serve all members of society and must be viewed as open to the viewpoints held by others.

Knowledge. Counselors must gain knowledge about the many differing political perspectives so that they can open a dialogue of mutual respect that leads to openness and respect of differences. Many counselors hold viewpoints that are not necessarily representative of the public at large. It is very difficult to serve others and to open up leadership positions if one is not aware of others' views and how they came to hold them. Knowledge about the worldviews of others is at the core of the development of multiculturally competent counselors and will form the basis for opening up ACA and the divisions to leaders from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Skills. Counselors must seek out ways of helping that do not place values held by the counselor onto the client so that clients can find their own way of growing. We must seek out opportunities to gain insight into our own views and motivations, and the views and motivations of those we serve. We must develop new ways to engage in discussions of the many multicultural and social justice issues that our profession and society face. To this end, we must familiarize ourselves with research on social justice and multicultural issues that addresses the wide spectrum of viewpoints that exist. We must stop trying to force one particular viewpoint onto others; and when others reject that viewpoint, we must stop labeling them as not supporting multicultural and social justice issues. Difference is what leads to compromise and it is the skill of compromise that will lead to the balance of power and mutual respect. Reflecting on his personal growth, the third author pointed out that his grandmother once said, *"All who care about the welfare of others must first care about the self. We cannot help others if we are blind to our own views and the effect they have on others."*

Participant Comments

One of the goals of the social justice academy was to encourage a dialogue among the participants and the presenters of the academy. Participants provided feedback both verbally and in writing. Their comments generally indicated that the presenters met the session's goals of defining cultural competence, examining cultural competencies, helping gain greater awareness of the multicultural competencies, moving participants to action, providing strategies for helping clients from diverse backgrounds, and learning about cultural self-awareness. Participants also noted that some care needs to be taken when advocating social justice with clients so as not to turn them off.

Another goal of the session was to help participants gain new insights into how multicultural social justice affects participants' professions and communities. Participants indicated that they gained insight into what it means to be a multiculturally competent counselor and how to put that understanding into action. Participants indicated that they learned the importance of accepting different multicultural perspectives. They also indicated they learned the importance of self-awareness, knowledge, and applying social justice to life in general and daily living. A number of comments focused on the need to develop insight into one's own biases and prejudices, as insight might lead to more acceptance of diversity in our jobs and our personal lives. Participants also discussed the importance of learning more about the concept of microaggression and providing validation for others.

The presenters reminded the participants about the call to action they had made at the outset of the presentation. Participants described what they would do as a result of this presentation.

Their comments covered a wide range of ideas including knowing the multicultural competencies and finding ways to personally implement these competencies. Participants discussed being more aware of and respectful of diversity, completing a cultural self-exploration, and examining self-bias as part of awareness process. Participants agreed to be more "inquiry" oriented and less "judgment" oriented. Several commented on being social justice advocates by first standing up for oneself and then standing up for others. Participants clearly saw the session as a call for action. However, participants also indicated that they would like to have clear definitions of cultural competence and tools for relating information on cultural competence to children and schools. They also reported needing more information about microaggressions.

Finally, many of the participants' suggestions focused on how to improve future presentations on multiculturalism and cultural competency. Participants wanted longer sessions and more time to discuss concepts, answer questions, and process the effects of the information. It was clear from their comments that the session was valuable and that the participants wanted more. The following comment sums up the feelings of many of the session participants, "The thing I leave with in relation to the workshop is the notion of not being someone's 'savior' but raising open dialogue to promote growth and change."

Recommendations for Action during 2010-11

The presenters and workshop participants developed several strategies:

The first strategy was to develop a support system for counselors and counselor educators who might believe they are "lone wolves" in their work environments. This support will help counselor educators feel empowered to stand strong and move forward in their work as advocates for multicultural social justice. This would help counseling professionals find and use their own voices, and help them balance the "I" with the "We." Empowering activities should be developed to help individuals feel connected.

Second, provide more "bottom-up" rather than "top-down" training. Training should be more participatory, integrating experiential components into workshops and academia. Promoting group dialogue and reducing lecture style presentations would help participants become more aware of the problems within society.

Third, assistance should be provided to aid the development of groups that work as a collective to bring about social justice.

Additional strategies included promoting change that is based on kindness and consideration; being less political correctness; and offering more authenticity in communication. Individuals should listen before engaging, be more patient, and embrace differences. All states should be invited to be a part of the Social Justice Leadership Development Academy and this should include the provision of workshops focused on meeting the social justice needs in schools and school districts.

Finally, the development of programs that provide more time to participate should be encouraged. Training programs should be expanded to include a wide variety of presenters who are not primarily ethnic/racial minorities and should include more participants from the

dominant racial/ethnic group. Training activities could include self-discovery activities, reacting to cultural values different than your own, and role-playing. Workshops could also be developed for teachers, children, and parents and could be provided in the schools when possible. Mentoring for graduate students should also be provided. As a long-term goal, multicultural social justice training should become a requirement for licensing or certification.

Conclusions

The need for multiculturally competent counselors is increasing as the population of various ethnic minority groups grows. This session conveyed the need for counselors to work together and empower ourselves with skills to meet the challenges and demands of diverse client groups.

Participants' feedback demonstrated that the session helped many participants prepare to go back and teach their peers and students about the importance of multicultural social justice competence. Participants indicated they had become willing to stand up with their colleagues to speak out against micro-aggression. The session helped participants ask important questions about why many individuals hesitate to take a stand, thereby allowing subtle aggressions to continue. They felt that much work is needed to encourage more therapists and counselors to become more open-minded, and that validating the need for social justice and speaking out against injustice is about affirming and confirming action, not about being right or wrong. The participants endorsed the importance of awareness of both self and other in the development of multicultural counseling competence. Finally, the participants indicated that becoming a multiculturally competent counselor is an active process, and that inaction perpetuates injustice rather than social justice.

Counselors' awareness of personal culture will benefit our clients and help them with the process of gaining awareness of cultures that are different from their own. The most important work for every counselor and mental health professional is to become more culturally responsive and respectful. Cultural competence is first and foremost a *commitment* to take the next step, and the next and the next toward offering accessible and appropriate services for the diverse clients and communities being served. Counselors need to learn to ask questions sensitively and to show respect for different cultural beliefs.

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