Counseling across cultural borders in South Africa

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Abstract. Within a counseling context, cognisance should be taken of differences in language and culture codes, problem presentation and interpretation, counseling expectations, problem solving methods, and views on the world, reality and self. In South Africa as elsewhere in the world, political activism and the disruption of individual life styles have direct implications for the life and world view of the Blacks, and therefore also for the counseling process itself. Rightfully or not, White counselors are often perceived as symbols of the Establishment, and the Black client is likely to impute all the negative experiences of oppression to the counselor.

The effectiveness of cross-cultural counseling is most likely to be enhanced when the counselor can relate to the outlook on life of the client, using counseling modalities and defining goals consistent with the life experiences and cultural values of the client. In this regard the White counselor might very well make a detailed analysis of the philosophy, function and methods of the very influential indigenous mental health practitioners (witch doctors) within the Black system. The accommodation of these concepts within acknowledged Western psychological approaches, seems feasible.

Counseling is becoming an increasingly intercultural enterprise. Although universal cross-cultural growth sequences exist in human development, research emphasis on the generalizability of behavioural, cognitive and biological functions has caused some helping specialists to underestimate the importance of cultural differences in psychological functioning.

Within a counseling context, cognisance should be taken of differences in language and culture codes, problem presentation and interpretation, counseling expectations (Yuen & Tinsley, 1981), problem solving methods, and views on the world, reality and self.

Within the Western framework, counseling and psychotherapy is a White middle-class activity that holds many values and characteristics different from those of Third World groups. Mental health services must be careful not to demand a type of racial and cultural conformity in client behaviour that is demeaning and denies different ethnic groups the right of their cultural heritage. Counselors tend to become ‘addicted’ to one system of cultural values in a dependency that is counter-productive to effective counseling (Ivey & Authier, 1978).
Cultural perspectives

Jackson (1975, in Ivey & Authier, 1978) points out that people from different backgrounds have different views of their world, particularly as they view the world from a racial perspective. According to Jackson, Black identity theory poses four modes or aspects of Black consciousness:
(a) 'Passive acceptance' where the Black individual copes with a white world by attempting to 'get by' and act like White people;
(b) 'Active resistance' where the Black person rejects White patterns of life;
(c) 'Redirection' wherein Whites become irrelevant but are not actively rejected. Emphasis is on personal and group pride in Blackness;
(d) 'Internalization' where aspects of the preceding three levels are combined in an increased sense of personal and cultural identity.

According to Ford (1985), recent research found ethnic minority counselees, regardless of nationality, occupying three major categories of social-psychological development;
(a) those who adhere to traditional values from their original culture (traditionalist);
(b) those who assimilate into the majority at the expense of their original culture (marginal);
(c) those who seek pluralistic integration within the new culture without sacrifice of their original culture (ethnic pride).

In South Africa, Pauw's (1963) research has shown that complex patterns of motivation exist in which the interplay of traditional and Western values and beliefs and systems of organization is unmistakable, but often these patterns cannot be classified in terms of one or the other culture, neither can the traditional and Western elements be sorted out.

It is clear that the majority of Blacks in South Africa hold world views different from the Whites. For Blacks, a strong determinant of world views is very much related to racism and their subordinate position in society.

In South Africa, the Blacks' world and life view is largely determined by three factors:
(a) the traditional culture, norms and values of South Africa's Black communities;
(b) the Western culture with which they are acquainted on account of their contact with the modern western, industrialised society;
(c) their expectation regarding the future, which is a very strong undifferentiated factor in the present state of political turmoil and uncertainty.

No doubt political turmoil and involvement are significant stressors especially in the lives of young people who are concerned with identity formation. Political activism and the disruption of individual life styles have