Cross-Cultural Pastoral Counseling: Method or Hermeneutic?

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This article explores some of the meta-questions that emerge when talking about “cross-cultural pastoral counseling.” Is it a distinct counseling method or a practical hermeneutic that prompts the counselor to examine his or her therapeutic approach? The author argues that “cross-cultural pastoral counseling” is really a hermeneutic that challenges the pastoral counselor to an ongoing evaluation of how and to what extent his or her approach to pastoral counseling may be guided by dominant social convention versus the gospel mandate of Matthew 25: 31-46 [RSV]. The article reviews relevant literature, discusses three fundamental changes (“conversions”) that are necessary for the pastoral counselor in order to do cross-cultural pastoral counseling, and presents a case illustration involving a multi-cultural pastoral counseling intervention.

After doing cross-cultural counseling and discussing the difficulties encountered in providing counseling to minority people, Roslyn A. Karaban asks the topical question, “Cross-Cultural Counseling: Is It Possible? Some Personal Reflections.” (1990) The author neither defines “cross-cultural counseling” nor does she adequately identify the meta-questions: What counseling is not “cross-cultural” or “cross-gender” to one degree or another? Where does one draw the line between cross-cultural counseling that is “possible” vs. “impossible”? Most problematical, however, the author assumes that “cross-cultural counseling” is a distinct counseling method in which one either does or does not engage. In failing to differentiate the alternative, the article is confusing and perhaps more damaging than helpful.

An alternative understanding of the term “cross-cultural counseling” sees it not so much as a distinct counseling method, but as a kind of

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psychosocial hermeneutic. This broader definition is not bound to any specific counseling method, e.g., existential, rational-emotive, cognitive therapies, etc., but provides an important meta-framework to discuss the need for expanding our theoretical assumptions about human meaning contexts, and developing more interdisciplinary, multi-method, inter-cultural approaches to counseling that challenge the profession's mainstream alignment with the dominant culture (Jackson, 1987; Herr, 1987; Vontress, 1988; Vontress, et al., 1988; Usher, 1989; Benesch, et al., 1989; Pedersen, et al., 1990).

Thus, as a psychosocial hermeneutic the term "cross-cultural counseling" refers to the ongoing need of professionals to realign themselves and their "helping methods" which are institutionalized and sanctioned by the pervasive (dominant) culture, so as not to exclude those people who relate to other (marginalized) cultural contexts. The term is a way of conceptualizing and articulating the need to expand and assimilate adaptations of counseling theory and practice in order to include persons whose frameworks of meaning (cultural fabric) are very different than, and even conflictual with, the dominant cultural quilt.

To the question, "Cross cultural counseling: is it possible?" Karaban concludes with an equivocation: "Yes, but it's not always best" [emphasis added]. This answer suggests that a question was asked in the first place. I see it more as a tautology which raises numerous problems on a number of levels.

CURRENT TREATMENT TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS

Recent national trends in declining social services provided for persons from racial/cultural minorities do not support Karaban's assertion that it "seems to be the 'in' thing these days to be a minority or to work with minorities" (219). In fact, it is contraindicated by "Safety Net Programs: Are They Reaching Poor Children?", a report of the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families (Miller, 1986) which cites that minority children remain disproportionately poor and chronically underserved.

This trend toward decreasing service to minorities and poor people is further supported by another report of the Select Committee entitled, "No Place to Call Home: Discarded Children in America" (Miller, 1990). This report cites that, as of 1988 46% of all children in foster care were minority children, a 5% increase from 1985. This figure is more than twice the proportion of minority children in the overall child population of the U.S. (7). Other data indicates that the numbers of Hispanics served by