Issues in cross-cultural counseling: An examination of the meaning and dimensions of tolerance

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Abstract. While there is a clear need to address the ethical dimensions of cross-cultural counseling, the current literature lacks both a theoretical model of ethnic tolerance and a suitable measure for assessing the construct. The present study addressed this gap in the extant literature by (a) developing a measure of ethnic tolerance based upon extensive field work, (b) examining the measure's reliability and construct validity in light of two models of ethnic tolerance, and (c) examining the relationship of several factors (e.g., age, gender, and exposure to those of a different culture) to scores on the tolerance measure. Results indicated that the tolerance measure was best viewed as a unidimensional construct, had substantial content validity, and had modest construct validity. Respondents with more social contact with immigrants, as well as those who had positive experiences with immigrants, tended to score higher on the tolerance measure. Results underscore both the complexity of factors associated with tolerance and the need for counselor education programs to provide arenas for students to become aware of their own values and biases and how these may affect culturally-different clients.

Introduction

The failure to integrate the issues of cross-cultural counseling into professional relationships constitutes a major concern in current counseling literature. Several writers have argued that involvement in a helping relationship with clients from a different cultural background without training in cross-cultural counseling infringes on the clients' cultural autonomy, impedes effective therapeutic relationships, and constitutes unethical behavior (Cayleff, 1986; Korman, 1974). Helping professionals without cultural awareness who work with culturally different clients may be engaging in a subtle form of oppression because they tend to respond according to their own world view, disregarding that of their clients (Sue, 1978).

Ethnic tolerance and multicultural counseling

The interest in the cultural dynamics of the therapeutic relationship is a relatively recent development. Johnson (1987) stated that until the late 1960s cross-cultural counseling was often considered to be the sole domain of foreign
student advisors. Meltzoff and Kornreich (1970) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature and found few studies examining the role of ethnic or cultural prejudices in the therapeutic relationship.

In the past two decades, however, research has focused on culture as a legitimate variable in the study of human behavior. Draguns (1975) argued that culture was a 'silent partner' in the counseling relationship and that professionals who disregard the influences of culture on a person's world view, attitudes, and behaviors are apt to be ineffective. Pedersen (1990) stated that multicultural counseling should not be a specialized sub-field of counseling, but rather a force that permeates all facets and levels of counseling. In his view, the multicultural perspective recognizes individual and group differences and the complex role of culture in interpersonal relationships.

Today, both counselors and psychological researchers are calling for the training of helping professionals to include awareness of and tolerance for cultural diversity (Casas, Ponterotto and Gutierrez, 1986; Cayleff, 1986; Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1986; and Ibrahim and Arredondo, 1986). This has resulted in a recognition of the need for cross-cultural competence within the helping profession, and some researchers have begun to discuss essential components of training for cross-cultural competence. For example, Ibrahim (1985) argued that effective helping strategies involve an acceptance of our own basic tendencies, the ways in which we comprehend other cultures, and the limits that our own views place on our comprehension. Further, she asserted that it is essential to understand our own cultural heritage and world view before we set about understanding and assisting others.

**Definition of ethnic tolerance**

For the purposes of this study, ethnic tolerance is defined as the presence of mutual respect, acceptance, and exchange of cultural beliefs between counselor and client, and the absence of prejudicial attitudes and beliefs that interfere with accepting the reality of the individual.

This definition emphasizes tolerance as an active interpersonal engagement and involvement, not as a passive forbearance with the undesirable. The prejudicial attitudes and beliefs referred to in the definition may take the form of ethnocentrism and stereotyping and may result from social, economic, or cultural threat. The definition therefore builds on the work of Sumner (1906) and Trope (1989) on ethnocentrism and stereotyping, and on the work of van Dijk (1987) regarding social, economic, and cultural threat. These concepts are discussed below.

**Theoretical framework**

There are currently two broad theoretical perspectives on issues of ethnic tolerance in the context of cross-cultural counseling. The first perspective emphasizes the dimensions of ethnocentrism and stereotyping in racial