
Cultural Bridging and Employment Counselling with Clients from Different Cultural Backgrounds

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Abstract

Some practical strategies for building relationships and working with clients from different cultural backgrounds are outlined in this paper. Counsellors are encouraged to build bridges with clients by exploring areas of common ground. The bridge-building process often requires an understanding of the client's world in terms of family and friends. Other intervention strategies are described which include working with transferable skills and attitudes along with an intensive form of behaviour rehearsal. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of some training issues.

Résumé

Cet article décrit des stratégies pratiques servant à créer des rapports et à conseiller des clients en provenance de milieux socio-culturels différents. Les conseillers sont encouragés à établir des rapports avec leurs clients en explorant certains points communs. Cet processus demande souvent d'obtenir une compréhension du monde d'un client en fonction de sa famille et de ses amis. D'autres stratégies d'intervention décrites dans cet article sont d'une part de travailler avec certaines compétences et attitudes transférables ainsi que des répétitions intensives de comportement. Finalement, cet article présente une brève discussion de certaines questions reliées à la formation.

In today's global economy the issue of culture is very much at the forefront of any type of economic activity (Herr, 1993). Within our society we are also faced with cultural concerns as we seek to come to terms with one another. Cultural differences occur because of different life experiences. According to Sue & Sue (1990) "culture consists of all those things people have learned to do, believe, value, and enjoy. It is the totality of ideals, beliefs, skills, tools, customs, and institutions into which each member of a society is born" (p. 34). Culture provides a particular perspective with respect to relationships with others, relationships with the environment and basic time orientation (Trompenaars, 1993). These perspectives provide a fertile ground for misunderstandings in dealings with one another.

The movement of people within and across societies is very much a reflection of our current situation. This transition is often accompanied by social, emotional and economic challenges. For many immigrants and refugees the dislocation is considerable, and requires a basic re-negotiation of identity within the new cultural group (Amundson, in press).

Faced with the above situation, employment counsellors are often one of the first sources of contact for the immigrant or refugee as they seek to establish themselves within the labour market. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the ways in which employment counsellors can build relationships and intervene appropriately when working with clients from different cultural backgrounds.

COUNSELLING STRATEGIES

The Beginning Relationship

The importance of the beginning relationship is critical. Gelso and Carter (1985) indicate that the establishment of the working relationship is the major factor that accounts for counselling success. Amundson (1993) points to the importance of “mattering” when working with persons who are unemployed. The concept of mattering refers to the sense of personal significance that we perceive in our relationships with others. Establishing a positive relationship with a client is regarded by various counselling theorists as a prerequisite for effective counselling practice (Egan, 1982; Amundson, 1989).

In a cross-cultural context the beginning relationship is developed through the recognition of cultural similarities as well as differences. Pedersen (1993) suggests that there is a need to keep one eye on the person and the other eye on the cultural context of the person during a counselling interview. By seeing the “person” in the cultural context we are more likely to recognize similarities between counsellor and client. Building the initial relationship depends on finding some common ground upon which to begin a discussion. It is a process of building a bridge between counsellor and client.

This initial information gathering and discussion must be based on respect, genuine interest, sensitivity, and openness to new information. This process should take the form of casual talk rather than an interrogation. When a client’s cultural background is acknowledged or interest expressed, the client begins to experience a sense of cultural and personal validation. Some illustrations of the types of questions that are appropriate to use during an interview are listed below:

- (a) Tell me about your name? Does it have any significance within your family and culture?
- (b) What country have you come from? What was life like for you there?
- (c) How did you come to Canada? What was it like coming here? What is your current status?
- (d) Do you have any family? Did you come with them? What do they think of what you are doing?

- (e) Do you know what we do here? How do you think that we can help you?

In a recent three-day training workshop with employment counsellors we found that a few counsellors were hesitant to ask these types of questions because they might be “too personal.” While it is not difficult to imagine certain situations where questioning could be “out of bounds,” we found that in most cases people are more than willing to share something of themselves with respect to their culture and personal story. If a counsellor is uncertain about asking a particular question, he or she may ask directly whether the client feels comfortable with the question. Also, by explaining how personal information can contribute to career planning, the client can have a broader context and rationale for the inquiry. Taking the time to ask some background questions helps convey respect, builds rapport, and establishes a foundation of “mattering.”

The Involvement of Family and Friends

Trompenaars (1993) highlights the importance of family and friends, and an important adjunct to building a relationship with a client is an understanding of the client’s world in terms of significant others. Since it is often not possible to acknowledge a person without finding out about their immediate and extended family, this contrasts sharply with the individualism that is reflected in many North American relationships. In view of the potential significance of family and friends, however, it is important that employment counsellors make a special effort to understand family and friendship constellations.

Amundson (1984) describes a direct and indirect method of involving family and/or friends in counselling. The indirect method is the most widely used and utilizes a Significant Others Questionnaire. With this approach, significant others are encouraged to complete a short questionnaire which focuses on the career talents and aspirations of the client. An illustration of this questionnaire is listed below. This particular form comes from the *Starting Points Group Assessment Program* (Westwood, Amundson, Borgen, Bailey & Davies, 1994, p. 36).

Please complete the following questions. Your opinion is important to help _____ make future career plans; therefore, your honesty is greatly appreciated.

1. What would you say this person is good at? What skills has this person demonstrated?
2. What would you see as this person’s major interest areas?
3. How would you describe the personal characteristics of this person?
4. What positive changes have you noticed over time in this person, especially in relation to work or looking for work?
5. In what ways could this person continue to improve?

6. If you were to suggest the ideal job or career prospects for this person, what would it be?

The questionnaire that has been described is appropriate in situations where the significant others are able to communicate in English. In many cross-cultural situations this may not be the case and the counsellor may need to explore whether there is any possibility of having significant others come to the interview. In situations where contact is not possible, the counsellor will have to rely on discussions with the client about his/her family and social situation. As was mentioned in the section on beginning relationships, these discussions can provide valuable information and also help to establish the cultural bridge.

Transferable Skills and Attitudes

Once people have established a relationship and attained a level of readiness, they will need to do some self-exploration in terms of interests, values, skills, and personality (Amundson, 1989). They will also need to begin an exploration and investigation of the current labour market. One of the most critical issues during this period is determining the transferable skills and attitudes. At one level the recognition of qualifications must be addressed and the employment counsellor can play a major role in helping clients deal with various levels of bureaucracy. The task of gaining recognition for qualifications from another country can take time and the results are often not encouraging. Thus, the counsellor must also be prepared to help clients deal with disappointments associated with the process.

Beyond the formal qualification issue there is the task of translating past experiences into terms which are applicable within the local labour market. It is within this domain that the counsellor assumes the role of "cultural guide" and helps clients to find areas of overlap. Relevant skills and attitudes need to be identified and framed within a North American context. Achieving this goal requires a full exploration of clients' stories, with careful attention to detail, and a focus upon identifying patterns of similarity. An example of skill transference from a distinctive culture to the North American context would be helping a farmer from the Punjab in India to identify the core skills related to planning, buying and harvesting, valuable assets in applying to be a retail clerk in a farm implement dealership in Canada.

The process of helping clients identify transferable skills and attitudes must be grounded in reality but also reflect a spirit of hope. The best way to create this positive climate is to allow clients to identify and/or express their fears and disappointments, to acknowledge the normalcy of these emotions, to recognize their strengths and assets, and finally to focus on realistic action planning which includes both short- and long-term goals.

With the help of a transferable skills grid it is amazing how many “common” skills can be identified.

Behaviour Rehearsal

The role of “cultural guide” is very important as clients attempt to organize information and negotiate job interviews. There are many competencies associated with the interviewing and job maintenance process. When explaining this information to a client it could be easy to overlook basic information that might increase chances of success. Some points that could be addressed include: (a) the time of the interview; (b) transportation to the interview; (c) clothing; (d) the importance of going alone to the interview; (e) body language, eye contact, handshake; (f) gender issues; (g) the greeting of the receptionist and interviewer; (h) where to sit and how; (i) making casual conversation; (j) answering questions in the interview; (k) asking questions; (l) leaving the interview; and (m) follow-up actions.

Addressing the complexities of the interviewing process can be overwhelming for clients and is usually best approached through behaviour rehearsal (Bandura, 1977; Kanger & Goldstein, 1991). As a teaching and learning strategy, the advantages of demonstration and practise is well established (Mak, Westwood & Ishiyama, 1994). Westwood (1994) has developed the following twelve-step behaviour rehearsal process for teaching social-cultural competence:

1. **ASSESS.** Use basic communication skills to determine needs of the client and assess what is the preferred approach.
2. **EXPLAIN.** Outline why and how specific skills may be of help in achieving a goal and include some minimal cultural explanations.
3. **DEMONSTRATE (1).** Show the client how to use the skill by demonstrating and modelling while the client observes.
4. **COMMENT AND QUESTION.** Encourage the client to discuss what happened and what they saw or heard. Clarify any areas of confusion.
5. **PRACTISE AND COACH.** Invite the client to try to repeat/simulate what was previously modelled. The client is now practising the behaviours while the leader assumes the stance of coach.
6. **FEEDBACK AND ENCOURAGEMENT.** Focus on the positive achievements and add correction where necessary.
7. **DEMONSTRATE (2).** Show the client a second time how to use the skill through demonstration.
8. **COMMENT AND COACH.** Repeat as above with client discussing how to incorporate additional changes.

9. PRACTISE AND COACH. Repeat step number five.
10. FEEDBACK AND ENCOURAGEMENT. Repeat step number six.
11. GOAL SETTING AND CONTRACTING. Have the client practise the skill in an actual setting. Allow time for additional practise if necessary.
12. FOLLOW-UP. Check on progress and provide additional encouragement and practise.

This comprehensive behaviour rehearsal strategy is designed to provide ample opportunity for illustration, practise, encouragement and correction. The step-by-step competency development approach can best be explained through an illustration. The client in this case is an unemployed, professionally trained accountant from Hong Kong who has recently arrived in Canada and has made several attempts to get a job. He indicates that he has made it to the interview, but seems to feel lost and uncertain as to how to present himself. He has tried on previous attempts to impress interviewers by bringing to the interview numerous documents to prove his ability. The counsellor recognizes that this client may not be aware of how to prepare and approach the actual interview. “Culturally appropriate” behaviours are reviewed by the counsellor and compared with what he has done in the past. The counsellor models with the client “how” to ask and answer questions, instructs him not to produce the documents unless asked for, encourages him not to “plead” with the interviewers, and so on. All of these activities are replaced with statements and behaviours which are more consistent with the Canadian labour market context. After modelling these new behaviours the client practises with the counsellor until they are both satisfied with the level of readiness. The client is then encouraged to resume applying for jobs and to try out this new approach in an actual interview. A follow-up meeting is arranged after the client has had the opportunity to participate in a job interview. This follow-up meeting allows for review and additional practise. In this way the client is his own agent, but the counsellor acts as supporter and coach. Of course, job-search competencies can also be taught and practised in a group context, increasing efficiency and consolidating learning within the group.

One aspect of the above procedure which is often overlooked is the necessity for follow-up. Despite the best intentions of the counsellor and client, there are many details which might be missed during an initial practise session. Because of these possible gaps, it is important to conduct a fairly extensive review and follow-up when a client has not been successful with an action plan. This review allows for debriefing, re-coaching and a further integration of the client’s personal style with the skills that are being learned.

SOME TRAINING ISSUES

Our approach to training counsellors in the use of the above methods has involved a combination of personal awareness activities and skill practise. This approach emphasizes the importance of self-awareness as a foundation for the acquisition of skills. As counsellors become more aware of their own culture, they become better able to understand the cultural concerns of others and to appreciate information about different cultural groups. They learn to “bridge” what initially in many cases appears to be great differences.

For many counsellors, the initial expectation is that cross-cultural training involves a type of “dog and pony” show where different cultural groups explain the main facets of their culture. Armed with this information, counsellors believe that they are better prepared to conduct their employment-counselling interviews.

While we have nothing against counsellors’ searching for information about cultural groups, we do have a concern about its place within a general training program. If it is offered too early it can lead to a false sense of security and stereotyping. In a recent workshop one participant from Jamaica pointed out the superficiality and misleading nature of this type of information. He made the point that if he were to describe Jamaica he would have to consider the lifestyles from the different parts of the island, also the issues of urban versus rural, poor versus wealthy, age, gender, and so on. A short summary might give a counsellor a glimpse of the culture, but it might also induce a false sense of knowing —“a little knowledge can be a deadly thing.”

From our perspective, a central message in training is that every encounter with a client represents a cross-cultural experience (Pedersen, 1991). People are unique and the task of the counsellor is to seek out some common ground of understanding. Information and communication skills can help us with this exploration, but in each instance we must begin anew with an openness to the person in front of us.

CONCLUSION

The strategies that have been highlighted in this paper represent a few key areas of involvement for employment counsellors when working with clients from different cultural backgrounds. It should be noted that the application of these strategies depends on the use of good communication skills, openness and sensitivity (both to oneself and to others).

In many respects this training builds on standard counsellor preparation and adds a cross-cultural awareness. It is our belief that cross-cultural preparation is a life work that depends on personal development and reflective professional practice.

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