

## A Perceptual Approach to Cross-Cultural Counselling

Carole Pigler Christensen

*McGill University*

### Résumé

Cet article présente un modèle multi-dimensionnel pour un counselling à travers des groupes ethnique différents, et qui a comme fondation des concepts de la psychology perceptive. Elle pose en prémisse que l'efficacité de counselling à travers des groupes ethniques différents dépend des perceptions réciproques du counsellor et du client aussi bien que de la méthode du counselling. L'article offre des principes directeurs pour le procédé de counselling et propose plusieurs orientations pour les recherches futures.

### Abstract

This paper presents a multi-dimensional model for cross-cultural counselling based on perceptual psychology concepts. The major premise is that the effectiveness of cross-cultural counselling is mutually dependent upon the counsellor's and the client's perceptions of each other, and of the counselling process itself. In addition to offering guidelines for counselling encounters, a number of propositions are outlined, which suggest directions for future research.

Cross-cultural counselling issues have been widely discussed and seriously debated by our neighbours in United States for several decades. Canadian counsellors are now becoming more aware of the reality of our pluralistic society, as they are being increasingly called upon to serve a multicultural clientele. Whether in the school or university clinic, working with young or old populations, singly or in groups, counsellors find themselves face to face with cultural differences. Demographic data suggest that cultural diversity is likely to increase in Canada, as representatives of groups that are of neither British nor French origin (presently numbering close to one-third of all Canadians) increase their relative proportion in the population (Clairmont & Wien, 1980, p. 316).

Cross-cultural counselling has been succinctly defined as any counselling encounter in which two or more of the participants are culturally different (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1983, p. 9). Pedersen (1978) has adopted the broader view that cross-cultural counselling should, in fact, include almost all differences:

If we consider the value perspectives of age, sex role, life-style, socioeconomic status and other special affiliations as cultural, then we may well conclude that all counselling is to some extent cross-cultural. (p. 480)

Although current trends suggest that all of the above applications of the term "cross-cultural" will become increasingly relevant, the focus of the present discussion is on the interaction between people of different

cultural backgrounds. For the purposes of this paper, the term "cross-cultural counselling" applies to any of the following situations: (a) the counsellor is from the majority group or dominant culture (i.e., in Canada, a White person of British or French background, depending upon province or geographic location) and the client is a representative of a minority group culture; (b) the counsellor is from a minority group background, and the client is from a majority group culture; (c) both client and counsellor are racially and ethnically similar but belong to different cultural groups. However, it is recognized that in present-day Canada, more often than not, the counsellor will be White, middle-class, and a representative of the majority group or the dominant culture (Wolfgang, 1975, p. 139).

Cross-cultural counselling encounters are often experienced as problematic, if not by the counsellor, by the client. The literature suggests that when client and counsellor are from different cultural backgrounds, the difficulties that may arise may be analyzed by examining factors relating to: the counsellor (Arbuckle, 1969; Bloombaum, Yamamoto, & James, 1968); the client (Banks, 1972; Ramcharan, 1975); the societal context in which counselling takes place (Elliston, 1978; Johnson, 1981).

The need for an understanding of the contributions of these three components (i.e., counsellor, client, and counselling process in societal context) is often recognized in cross-cultural counselling. However, traditional counselling approaches are heavily weighted toward an emphasis on intrapsychic client variables, rather than on the equal and reciprocal contributions of both counsellor and client to the counselling process (Patterson, 1980). The impact of sociocultural variables (e.g., culture, ethnic environments, political systems, social class status) on counsellor and client behaviour is generally treated as peripheral, if considered at all. The need to develop new models, which take cultural variables into account, is now widely recognized in the field of cross-cultural counselling (Atkinson, et al., 1983).

The major purpose of this paper is to illustrate the usefulness of concepts borrowed from perceptual psychology, as tools for understanding the complexities of cross-cultural counselling. The basic components of perceptual psychology are briefly summarized below. Those aspects of the theory which are particularly relevant to cross-cultural counselling are highlighted. A further purpose is to present a model for cross-cultural counselling based on a perceptual frame of reference. Although few well-documented studies exist attesting to the success or failure of cross-cultural counselling relationships, the literature suggests that perception is a major factor around which a number of assumptions and concerns converge (Christensen, 1984). Incorporation of a perceptual approach would, therefore, seem to hold considerable promise for the field of cross-cultural counselling.

## MAJOR COMPONENTS OF PERCEPTUAL THEORY

Perceptual psychology is basically a field (or phenomenological) theory. Lewin (1951) is credited for having conceptualized the importance of a person's "lifespace" or "perceptual field" as a fundamental element in the psychological treatment of the individual. Historically, Lewin's formulation led to the development of a theoretical framework which, unlike most psychological theories of the day, was broad enough to encompass environmental factors. Subsequently, several approaches to counselling and psychotherapy have been developed which, although differing significantly, share a common emphasis on the perceptions of the individual client. Rogers' (1951) client-centred therapy was the first, and perhaps most widely accepted, of these approaches. However, Combs (1972) and his associates were responsible for applying this theory to helping relationships, in order to test its usefulness for training and research.

### *The Perceptual Field*

As described by Rogers (1951), the perceptual field is defined as the entire universe, including the self, as experienced by the individual at a given moment. This "private map," by which the individual lives, is his/her "reality," although experience as perceived may not correspond to any objective reality. All systems of the perceptual field are inter-related, so that a change in one affects all other parts of the system. The perceptual field is characterized by stability or organization; fluidity, or flexibility; and direction, or need satisfaction. The fundamental need toward which the individual strives is adequacy or self-actualization. At any moment, the field contains perceptions at varying levels of awareness, from those toward which behaviour is directed, to those which are vague and undifferentiated. However, perceptual psychologists differ from Freudian-based theorists in that they tend to reject the notion of two distinct conditions of awareness, conscious and unconscious, with the latter being totally barred from awareness.

### *The Self*

Perception refers to any differentiation a person makes in his perceptual field, whether or not an objective stimulus is present. As a result of the tendency toward differentiation (an aspect of the actualizing tendency), part of the individual's experience becomes symbolized in awareness as self-experience. Interaction with significant others in the environment leads to a concept of self, which includes all aspects of the perceptual field referred to as "I" or "me."

At the centre of the perceptual field, is the self-concept, which includes both descriptions of self (e.g., tall, old) and the values placed upon self-perceptions (e.g., good, bad). The self-concept is what a

person perceives himself to be or what he believes about himself; this may or may not correspond to any "real" self. The role of the self-concept is important to the economy of the individual, as its selectively determines everything else the person perceives, to maintain congruence with existing concepts of self. Thus, the self-concept tends to be highly stable and self-perpetuating as, once established, it is defended (Rogers, 1959).

### *Perception, Learning, and Culture*

Learning plays a significant role in perceptual psychology. From the perceptual viewpoint, learning is the discovery of personal meaning, and is an outgrowth of the kinds of differentiations the person makes in the process of development. Although the individual is selective in the personal meanings placed on his/her discoveries, the culture to which (s)he is exposed determines the perimeter of the perceptual field, within the societal context. Through socialization processes and interaction with significant others, the individual learns not only who and what (s)he is, but also acquires values, taboos, moral precepts, and beliefs about different ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups, which are prevalent in the particular culture (Linton, 1945). Therefore, how we behave toward people (and things) is a direct outgrowth of our perceptions of them. Much of what is learned about self and others is, of course, transmitted through non-verbal communication.

### *Perception and Communication*

Within the framework of perceptual psychology, communication is a function of common meanings, or the overlapping of the perceptual fields of the communicator and the person who receives the communication (Combs, 1972). Communication goes beyond what is said or intended to include what is comprehended. The latter is determined by the meanings that make up the person's perceptual field. When meanings overlap, people experience the feeling of being understood. As Kohut (1959) observed:

Our psychological understanding is most easily achieved when we observe people from our own cultural background... we are enabled to empathize with them on the basis of clues that may seem insignificant to people from a different background. (p. 463)

People from different cultural backgrounds share fewer similar life experiences, and are more likely to have dissimilarities in their perceptual fields. Therefore, the chances that they may perceive the same situations, words, and experiences, quite differently are augmented.

Yet even when we observe people from a different culture... we will be able to understand them psychologically through the discovery of some common experience with which we can empathize. (Kohut, 1959, p. 463)

In order to communicate effectively, individuals must build upon those commonalities that do exist, and discover new meanings together.

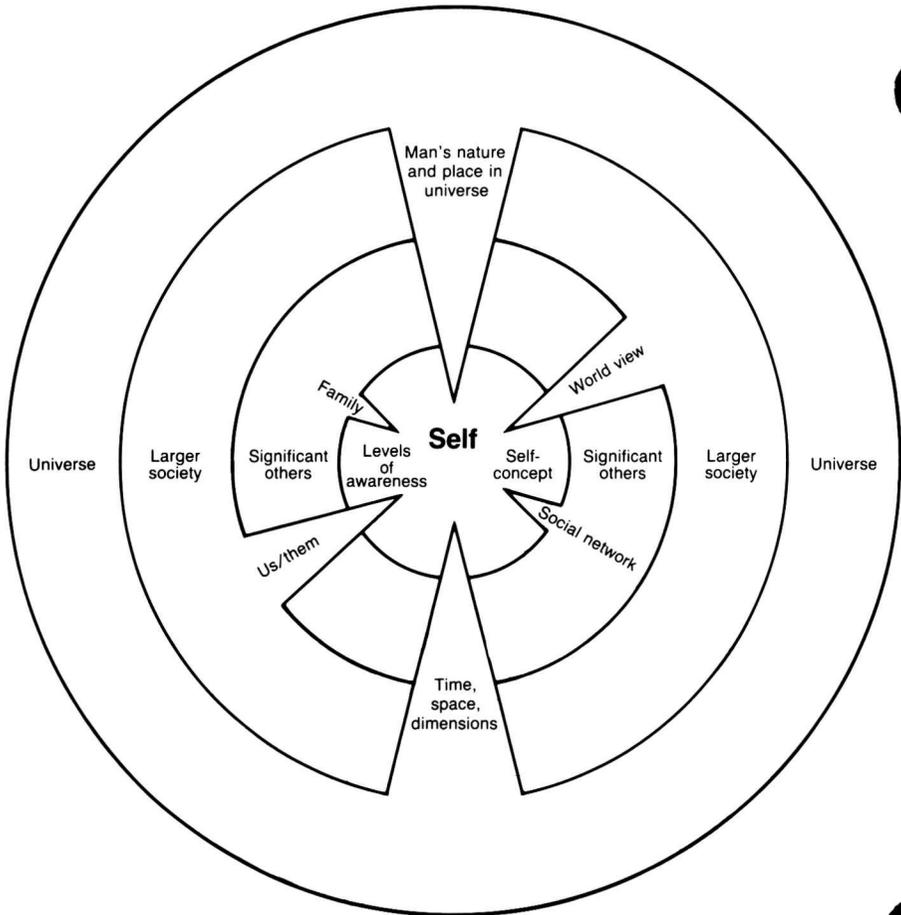
#### A PERCEPTUAL APPROACH TO CROSS-CULTURAL COUNSELLING

The proposed approach to cross-cultural counselling incorporates the perceptual psychology framework summarized above. It is meant to offer guidelines to counsellors and also to permit the formulation and testing of hypotheses, based on the underlying assumptions of this approach. Several authors have suggested specific approaches, strategies, and techniques for counselling particular ethnocultural populations (Atkinson, et al., 1983; Marsella & Pedersen, 1981). Others have offered general guidelines concerning the skills and competencies thought to be generically applicable to all cross-cultural counselling situations (Ivey, 1981; Stewart, 1981). However, this model differs from most earlier models in that it offers a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach in which one theoretical framework is sufficiently encompassing to address individual, ethnocultural, and sociopolitical factors. Also, equal weight is given to the analysis of the perceptions of client and counsellor, as both are recognized as affecting the counselling process and outcome. Furthermore, it is assumed that everything pertaining to the experience of the perceptual field during a counselling encounter is as applicable to the counsellor as it is to the client. The graphic model presented in Figure 1 incorporates the main features to be discussed, and Table 1 outlines the specific variables involved in the cross-cultural counselling model.

Figure 1 presents a graphic illustration of the perceptual field as experienced by each participant in the cross-cultural counselling encounter. An important aspect of this approach, which is depicted in the graphic model, is that it allows for recognition of the fact that the cultural environment and its events are continually penetrating the self-boundary of counsellor and client. It indicates that, at any given moment, the perceptual field of each person in the cross-cultural counselling encounter is organized so that the self is at the centre of the field, but perceptions of significant others, the larger society, and the universe, are present, simultaneously, at varying levels of awareness. The events at the centre of the field are most influential, while those near the periphery generally exert less influence. However, all aspects of the perceptual field operate as a unified system, in which all parts affect each other and, therefore, the self, at all times.

The application of most traditional counselling models to cross-cultural counselling has been problematic. This is, not least of all, due to the intrapsychic and personality-based focus of most models, to the exclusion of sociocultural, economic, and political factors. As illustrated in the graphic model, counsellor and client bring much more than their

**Figure 1**  
The perceptual field as experienced by each participant in the cross-cultural counselling encounter.



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respective psychological make-ups into the counselling situation. Although this is now widely recognized by most cross-cultural counselling theorists, many approaches which are applied to cross-cultural counselling do not incorporate variables pertaining to the counsellor's, as well as the client's, sociocultural milieu systematically. It is sometimes as if those aspects of the participants' lives (especially the counsellors') which originate from the outer two concentric circles in Figure 1, do not exist. The inclusion of sociocultural factors thus becomes peripheral, or

a mere adjunct to traditional counselling models when these are applied to cross-cultural situations.

The perceptual perspective illustrated in Figure 1 also indicated that the various components of the phenomenological field, represented by concentric circles, have permeable "boundaries." For example, time-space dimensions, although apparently originating from perceptions of the universe, and far removed from the core "self," intercept and permeate the individual's perception of the larger society and of significant others, thus exerting considerable influence on the self. Perceptions converge, simultaneously and continuously on the self, forming the momentary gestalt. This is a most important perspective, which is often lacking. Most counselling approaches treat the individual counselling encounter as an isolated event, as if when the office door closes, all aspects of the participants' lives, with the exception of those purposefully attended to, are magically "screened out." Likewise, the counselling process is seemingly often considered to be the most important aspect of the client's (although seldom of the counsellor's) life.

Parties to the cross-cultural counselling encounter may experience each other at different levels of the concentric circles of their respective perceptual fields. A most important question for any cross-cultural counselling encounter is to determine how close to the field centre counsellor and client are perceiving each other as persons (i.e., are they in each others "significant other" realms?). An equally important area for study involves the extent to which the counselling process itself, as a method of resolving personal dilemmas or environmental events, is perceived to be central to problem resolution. Finally, the model lends itself to a study of the micro aspects of the counselling process, as different skills, techniques, and behaviours used by the counsellor may be perceived as more or less meaningful. Likewise, specific client behaviours (verbal and non-verbal) may be experienced as coming close to, or being far removed from, the counsellor's "self." It seems possible that the degree of involvement of client and counsellor, at a given moment, could be gauged according to the perception of the relevance of the momentary event.

### *The Perceptual Field of Counsellor and Client*

At the "self" level (Figure 1, first concentric circle) the client and counsellor each enter the cross-cultural encounter committed to a particular view of self, and everything pertaining to the self. Each is prepared, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways, to defend that perception.

Among the most important aspects of the self are those pertaining to ethnocultural and racial identity (Atkinson, et al., 1983). In North American societies, most identifiable ethnic groups that are not con-

sidered to be part of the "majority" culture have suffered varying forms of inferior status and lack of equal opportunity, politically, socially, and/or economically. Historically, this has been particularly true of the "visible" (non-white) minorities (Porter, 1965) who, even today, seem to perceive the greatest amount of discriminatory treatment (Head, 1980; Canada House of Commons Report, *Equality Now*, 1984). At the same time, those defined as the "founding cultures" or "races" (the British and the French) have enjoyed the greatest degree of power, privilege, and prestige (Kallen, 1982). Such factors are, naturally, perceived on some level of awareness, and are most pertinent to the self-concept of the counsellor, as well as client. Thus, the model offered here assumes that each participant in the cross-cultural encounter is cognizant of his/her respective status, both in the context of the counselling relationship (where the counsellor is clearly in a position of authority) and in the wider societal context (where counsellor and client may occupy different social class strata). Although most traditional counselling models fail to include the analysis of such important perceptions, they remain enormously influential in the counselling process.

In addition, each person is continuously evaluating the meaning of moment to moment events, and of the counselling process itself. Moreover, all of the other dimensions of the perceptual field, as illustrated in the diagram, are impinging upon the participants at some level of awareness, even if imperceptibly (e.g., influences of significant others, the larger society, and universe-related factors).

An examination of the second concentric circle indicates how significant others can, and indeed do, exert considerable influence on the cross-cultural counselling process. Significant others include the family members and the social network of the participants. As noted above, it is from these important figures that counsellor and client will have learned social norms, and the explicit and implicit rules governing social interaction. In his literature review, Johnson (1981) attests to the myriad actions taking place within the therapeutic microcosm which are "themselves embedded in a social reality structure residing outside the confines of the office," and which extend beyond the characteristics of a particular counsellor, and client (p. 63). For example, cultural interaction rules learned from significant others may have unintended negative effects on communication processes when counsellor and client are from different ethnic backgrounds, and are unaware of the rules which govern each other's behaviour. Bi-cultural people are often aware of behaving in quite different ways depending on the rules of interaction of their various social networks. Several authors (Sue, 1981; Vontress, 1974; Goldstein, 1981) have also noted that misunderstanding and misinterpretation often result from process manifestations of cultural differences, which may take the forms of stereotyping, transference-countertransference, and differing expectations of therapy between counsellor and client.

The larger society is represented by the third concentric circle in Figure 1, and includes the client's and counsellor's respective perceptions as to which ethnic cultural and racial group(s) are considered "us," and which "them," as well as their world views. The diagram indicates that elements of the larger society are ever-present in cross-cultural counselling. When members of ethnic groups which generally maintain a high degree of social distance meet in a counselling encounter, they will probably perceive each other initially, at least, as representatives of "us"/"them" configurations. This will almost surely be true when the counsellor represents a middle or upper-middle class background and the client a lower class background, which is estimated to be the case much of the time (Atkinson, et al., 1983, p. 19).

As noted by Johnson (1981), social class operates in a like manner to ethnic categorization:

... as boundary mechanisms operating to regulate family relationships, friendship networks, courting, recreational patterns, usage of language, expectations, and, of course, opportunities. (p. 79)

The same author also observed that when negative ethnic stereotyping occurs, it usually involves "a selective exaggeration of *cultural* characteristics in the context of a distorted characterization of *social class* position" (p. 79). An understanding of the difficulties which may be caused by "us"/"them" perceptions should be an integral part of cross-cultural training. The perceptual model lends itself to the appropriate type of analysis.

Differences in world-view may also exist between client and counsellor. Although seldom recognized, counselling theories include assumptions about the root causes of clinical problems, most of which are based in the individual. Similarly, theories have implicit assumptions as to what should be changed in order for client problems to be solved. Again, the needed changes are generally believed to be in the individual domain, or perhaps within the family context. Most traditional counselling theories seldom go beyond the client's immediate environment (e.g., the school or job situation) when delineating targets or strategies for change. This individualistic orientation is itself based in the larger society, as it is an integral part of the basic North American value system.

Yet, as observed by Sue (1981) many ethnocultural minority clients have had life experiences which lead them to believe that social, economic, and political systems are more powerful forces than personal attributes. During the past two decades, a number of minority counsellors have suggested that to be effective, cross-cultural counsellors must widen their repertoire of change strategies to incorporate changing a sociopolitical system which keeps certain racial and cultural groups in an inferior position. However, this implies that a change in the coun-

sellor's world view may be necessary and that, as well, more encompassing counselling models, must be developed. Atkinson, et al. (1983) have aptly summarized the present state of affairs:

Unimodal counseling approaches are perpetuated by graduate programs in counseling that give inadequate treatment to the mental health of minorities. Cultural influences affecting personality, identity formation, and behavior manifestations frequently are not part of training programs. When minority group experiences are discussed, they are generally seen and analyzed from the "White middle class perspective." (p. 15)

Consequently, minorities tend to be viewed from an ethnocentric viewpoint, and mainly in terms of their degree of "deprivation," "disadvantage," or "dissimilarity," as compared to the majority group.

The fourth concentric circle represents the universe dimension, as perceived by the participants in cross-cultural counselling. Philosophical assumptions about man's place in the universe and about the nature of man are inherent in all counselling theories. Most Western-based theories assume that man is the "master of his fate" and can overcome almost any obstacle as the "highest living form of life" on earth. In the latter part of the twentieth century, belief in the miracles that can be wrought by technology have all but replaced a belief in a traditional God or creative spirit. This is in sharp contrast to the view of the universe held by many cultural and racial groups, including those often referred to as "Third World" or "Fourth World" peoples (e.g., Asians and North American Indians). Many of these cultural minorities view man as part of nature, rather than having been created to be ruler over nature and all "lower" forms of life.

Differences in perspective as to man's place in the universe may also be gleaned from personality theories, concepts of mental health and illness, and the specific techniques employed during the counselling process. By use of the graphic model presented in Figure 1, it is possible to categorize various counselling theories, and their associated approaches to counselling, as being concerned mainly with a particular dimension of the perceptual or phenomenological field. For example, psychoanalysis deals mainly with the "self" dimension; transactional, behavioural, and client-centred theories deal primarily with self in relation to significant others; personal construct theories are concerned with self in relation to significant others and the larger society; and existential and phenomenological theories are concerned mainly with the self, as it relates to all other dimensions (i.e., significant others, the larger society, and universal dimensions).

Finally, time and space are clearly important in cross-cultural counselling encounters. The counsellor generally takes charge of setting the time and space limits within which the counselling sessions will take place. The client is expected, for example, to conform to the professional's accepted view of the appropriateness of arriving on time, for a

50-minute office visit. Clients who do not co-operate by observing the expected time-space rules risk being labelled "resistant." The most effective negative sanction which counsellors may employ for clients who fail to conform to time-space dimensions is termination of service.

#### A PERCEPTUAL MODEL FOR CROSS-CULTURAL COUNSELLING

Table 1 outlines the specific elements to be considered in a cross-cultural counselling encounter, within a perceptual framework. There are several advantages to this model. It provides examples of some of the myriad aspects of the perceptual field that may be perceived at any given moment, by each individual involved in the encounter. It also allows for the integration of both personal (psychological) and environmental (sociocultural) factors which should be included in an analytical framework. Moreover, the model indicates that at a given moment during the encounter, any one of the innumerable personal and environmental or cultural factors outlined, may occupy the foreground in the counsellor's or the client's gestalt. In other words, it is a reminder that the cross-cultural counselling process, as it is being encountered, is but one aspect of the perceptual field of each participant and will be given meaning only in accordance with its perceived relevance.

With regard to the "Levels of Perceptual Analysis" listed in Table 1, it is important to note that during the counselling encounter the levels are not perceived by the counsellor or client as discrete entities. Rather, the awareness of each individual involved fluctuates, in an ever-changing figure-ground configuration. Some of the elements of which the momentary perceptual gestalt may be composed are presented in the middle column. The perceptual goals of counselling (i.e., which, ideally should be perceived by all parties) are presented in the last column, and are considered to be applicable to both the individual counselling session and the counselling process itself. An example of an initial meeting between counsellor and client is offered below to illustrate the usefulness of the perceptual model in understanding the perceptual complexities of the moment-to-moment cross-cultural interaction.

#### A PERCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF AN ENCOUNTER

As the counsellor sees the client for the first time he notices his complexion and wonders, as he studies his features, if he is a "foreigner" or an "immigrant" (self level). Almost simultaneously, he remembers a comment made by his unemployed brother (significant other level), suggesting his annoyance when he sees "foreigners" taking jobs from Canadians. The thought quickly occurs to him that he isn't really sure of whether he thinks people from poorer countries should have an opportunity to seek a better life in Canada in times like these (world view level). He then becomes aware of a fleeting feeling of discomfort as he

Table 1  
*A Cross-Cultural Counselling Model,  
 Based on Perceptual Psychology*

| <i>Level of Perceptual Analysis</i> | <i>Elements of Perceptual Field of Counsellor/Client</i>   | <i>Perceptual Goals for the Counselling Process</i>  |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Self                                | Self-concept and value given to various attributes (e.g., age, sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived as positive or negative). | Meaningful interpretations of important events during counselling experience.  |
|                                     | Perception of cultural, racial, ethnic, class differences between self and other in counselling context.                                       | Perception of mutual trust, sincerity, acceptance, respect.  |
|                                     | Events perceived as meaningful (e.g., positive, painful, critical) as counselling progresses.  | Perception of agreement regarding presenting problem, "contract," treatment goals.   |
|                                     | Culturally determined modes of expressing and dealing with feelings of anger, joy, pain, loss, frustration, vulnerability, etc.                | Perception of verbal and non-verbal communications being understood and valued.  |
|                                     | Perception of various cultural influences at varying levels of awareness.  | Experience of mutual understanding, empathy, genuineness, rapport.   |
| Significant others                  | Extended or nuclear family organization; physical environment and emotional atmosphere of home.  | Incorporation of meaning of family unit from client's cultural perspective; recognition of inherent strengths.   |
|                                     | Cultural group identified with; and who is considered "us," who "them."  | Counsellor is sufficiently knowledgeable about client's cultural group (e.g., norms; values; life-style; child-rearing practices; religion; concept of mental health and illness). |
|                                     | Cultural groups represented among intimate friends and associates.   | Recognition of bicultural aspects of client's/counsellor's perceptual field, when relevant.  |
|                                     | Neighbourhood; multicultural or homogeneous; socio-economic level represented.   | Counsellor's knowledge of cultural life as it exists in ethnic neighbourhood.  |

| <i>Level of Perceptual Analysis</i> | <i>Elements of Perceptual Field of Counsellor/Client</i>   | <i>Perceptual Goals for the Counselling Process</i>   |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Significant others                  | <p>Work environment and culture which it represents; degree of acceptance experienced.</p> <p>Societal and cultural factors relating to degree of employment/underemployment; job-related stress/satisfaction; job network.</p>  | <p>Realistic appraisal of job situation, work-related problems.</p> <p>Ability to recognize and find ways to deal with individual, cultural, and institutional racism, prejudice, and discrimination.</p>   |
| World View                          | <p>View of one's place in society and in the world (e.g., oppressed, free) as determined by experience with significant others in both minority and dominant cultures.</p> <p>National, political, ideological, and philosophical viewpoints and loyalties.</p> <p>Future, present, or past orientation.</p> | <p>Understanding of how world view was formulated; factors which influence present world view.</p> <p>Non-judgemental understanding and appreciation regarding response to societal systems and events, even in light of differences in viewpoints.</p> <p>Sensitive but realistic appraisal of meaning of time orientation and its consequences, including preference for action-oriented/reflective counselling modalities.</p> |
| Universe                            | <p>Man in relation to nature; the nature of man; spiritual values.</p> <p>View of man's place in the universe (i.e., man in relation to time, space, and the cosmos).</p> <p>Fundamental meaning of creation, life, death.</p>   | <p>Perception of counsellor's understanding and appreciation of client's views and experiences, including "folk-ways" and beliefs.</p> <p>Recognition of role of culture in determining frame of reference.</p> <p>Appreciation of individual and culturally-determined differences without positive or negative connotation.</p>   |

thinks he perceives an accent as the client says "Hello"; he wonders if he will have trouble understanding this client (self level).

The client, on the other hand, wonders upon seeing the fair-skinned, well-groomed counsellor for the first time, if he will be one of those types who thinks he's "got all the answers" (larger society level). Simultaneously, he perceives that the counsellor is also "sizing him up," and realizes that he resembles his high school sports coach (significant other). His stomach muscles tighten as he remembers his hurt and bitterness when he overheard his coach of many years, who he had admired and respected, make a derogatory comment about "Paki's" (self level). As he smiles and says "Hello," he wishes he could take his parent's advice and "just take things as they come" instead of always feeling that life was meant to offer more (universe level). He wonders if talking about his problem with this counsellor won't just be a waste of time (self level).

The above example, (which takes place during the first moments of an initial cross-cultural encounter) indicates that even an analysis using audio-visual equipment would tend to miss the totality of the multi-level perceptual experience of counsellor and client. Similarly, an analysis of these first moments of the counselling session dealing exclusively with an examination of the more traditional variables (e.g., appearance, personality, communication, presenting problem, treatment plan, and goals) would fail to fully come to grips with culture-related values, expectations, and modes of behaviour (e.g., Does the group to which the client belongs tend to smile when anxious? What value does the counsellor attach to his own ethnocultural and racial group, as compared to that of the client? From which significant others did client and counsellor learn cultural myths and stereotypes about their own and the other's group? What is the relative social standing of counsellor and client, and what feelings does this generate in each of them?). Although the above encounter involves a one-to-one situation, the perceptual frame of reference is equally applicable to multi-person (i.e., family or group) counselling. The adoption of the perceptual model of cross-cultural counselling would enable counsellors to widen the scope of counsellor and client assessment, process variables, and treatment goals, considerably.

#### UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS AND HYPOTHESES FOR RESEARCH

The major underlying assumption of the perceptual psychology model proposed here is that the effectiveness of cross-cultural counselling depends upon the counsellor's perception of the client, and the client's perception of the counsellor. This appears to be true from the moment of their initial meeting, through termination. It is recognized, however, that client and counsellor perceptions of each other may vary, or change, with time. Another assumption is that the perceptions of the

counsellor are equally as important as those of the client, and should, therefore, receive equal attention in future cross-cultural theories, models, and research.

Although this may seem to be stating the obvious, a review of the counselling literature indicates that most theories emphasize somewhat different criteria for effective cross-cultural counselling than those relating to perception, and deal more extensively with client, than with counsellor, variables relating to cultural and racial influences. For example, some authors have emphasized the importance of the client's perception of the counsellor's credibility, attractiveness, and trustworthiness, as well as the importance of the client's "psychological set" or frame of mind (Sue, 1981). Other investigators have been concerned with the importance of various counsellor offered facilitative conditions (e.g., positive regard, congruence) with empathy considered to be paramount for effective cross-cultural encounters (Harrison, 1975). Although there is considerable anecdotal and clinical literature suggesting that the counsellor's perception of the culturally and racially dissimilar client may interfere with effective treatment, (Banks, 1972; Siegel, 1974) empirical studies have not generally addressed the question of how the counsellor's perception of the client, as representative of a particular ethnocultural or racial group, affects the counselling process and outcome. As Smith, et al. (1978) observe:

It is often naively assumed that "professionals have miraculously 'cleansed' themselves of racial and class biases . . . (however), they have the same cultural stereotypes, fears, and concerns about individuals of different cultures and races as the rest of the population." (pp. 148-149)

Similarly, studies have not adequately investigated client perceptions of counsellor ethnocentrism or racism, in terms of their effects on the counselling process. There is reason to believe that ethnocultural, racial, and class background may be among the most salient factors determining the counsellor's and client's perceptions of each other (Sundberg, 1981; Sue, 1981). Minority professionals have become increasingly vocal in suggesting that, until counsellor perceptions relating to ethnicity, race, and social class are adequately addressed, cross-cultural counselling will continue to be limited in its effectiveness.

### *Propositions*

The propositions below are stated in the form of testable hypotheses, and attempt to summarize and extend common perceptual themes in the cross-cultural literature.

**Proposition 1.** Any comprehensive theory or model for effective cross-cultural counselling must address counsellor and client variables equally.

**Proposition 2.** To be fully effective, a cross-cultural counselling theory or model must deal with all pertinent client and counsellor perceptions.

Corollary 2.A. Among the most pertinent and influential perceptions North American counsellors and clients may have, which affect the counselling relationship, are those pertaining to socioeconomic class, racial, cultural, and ethnic group membership.

Proposition 3. The cross-cultural counselling relationship will be negatively affected whenever counsellors are unable to deal with relevant perceptions, however vague, regarding their own and the client's ethnocultural and racial identity, and everything which that entails, honestly and effectively (e.g., the existence and effects of racism).

Corollary 3.A. Counsellors who are unable to deal honestly and effectively with relevant perceptions relating to their own and the client's ethnocultural and racial identity will not be perceived as offering optimum levels of facilitative conditions (e.g., empathy, positive regard, congruence, immediacy, concreteness, confrontation) in relationships with dissimilar clients.

Corollary 3.B. When the counsellor is able to generate an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance, most clients will at some point, and in some way, share their feelings and perceptions regarding their ethnic, cultural, and racial identity.

Corollary 3.C. In cross-cultural counselling with oppressed minorities, accurate counsellor perception involves a willingness and capacity to experience the pain, vulnerability, anger, frustration, helplessness, and fear of the client.

Proposition 4. When counsellors are unable to deal with relevant perceptions relating to their own and the client's ethnocultural and racial identity, this will have an immediate, escalating, and lasting detrimental effect on the counselling relationship.

It is important to note that the onus is on the counsellor to be perceptive in picking up clues as to which, when, how, and at times even if, perceptions relating to the counsellor's or client's class, ethnic, racial, or cultural identity should be confronted. As in any other matter, the competent and sensitive counsellor must be aware of the timing and therapeutic appropriateness of his/her interventions. The counsellor must, however, be sufficiently self-aware to distinguish between avoidance of difficult or uncomfortable perceptions, and therapeutic acumen.

#### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been two-fold: To demonstrate the applicability of theoretical concepts borrowed from perceptual psychology to cross-cultural counselling, and to offer a measurable model for implementing some of these concepts in practice. To date, there is no theory of counselling or psychotherapy which emphasizes ethnic, cultural, racial, socioeconomic, and political factors, making these an integral part, if not the basis, of the theoretical orientation. As the theory

employed determines what will be attended to during counselling, as well as when goals have been accomplished, this is a most detrimental omission.

A model based on perceptual theory offers an opportunity to develop training programs and evaluation measures that are free of the often decried White, middle-class bias. There is no assumption that counsellors come from the majority culture, while clients are cultural minorities. Rather than continuing to give lip service to the adage that the counsellor contributes 50 per cent to the counselling relationship, the proposed perceptual model asks the counsellor to examine his/her self on the same levels of analysis generally included in a diagnostic assessment of the client. The model also holds promise for research, as some hitherto undefined perceptual variables in need of further study, are made more explicit.

A “metatheory” (general theory) based on a perceptual view of reality might, eventually, “find harmony among several seemingly opposing views or theories” (Ivey, 1981). All approaches to cross-cultural counselling seem to have as their aim freeing people to perceive themselves and the world more accurately, and enabling them to cope with that reality without losing sight of the essential human qualities, of themselves and of those around them. Logically, few would believe that this can be accomplished if we deny our clients—or ourselves—an opportunity to fully explore those components of the perceptual field pertaining to our cultural, ethnic, and racial identities, wherever that may lead us.

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*About the Author*

Carole Pigler Christensen is an Assistant Professor and Co-ordinator of the M.S.W. program at the McGill University School of Social Work, Montreal, Quebec, where she has taught for several years. She holds an M.S.W. degree from the University of Michigan, a Graduate Diploma from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and the D.Ed. degree from McGill University's Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling (1980). Her long-standing interests and current professional activities are in the areas of cross-cultural counselling, education, and research. She conducts cross-cultural staff development workshops regularly, at home and abroad. Research underway examines helping professionals' knowledge base for multicultural practice.

Requests for reprints should be sent to: Carole Pigler Christensen, School of Social Work, McGill University, 3506 University Street, Montreal, P.Q. H3A 2A7.