

**CROSS-CULTURAL COUNSELLING: SOME SPECIAL
 PROBLEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE
 CANADIAN COUNSELLOR**

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Abstract

The need for developing particular skills for working with clients who are racially or culturally dissimilar from the counsellor is becoming increasingly apparent; especially in the Canadian society. Problems for both client and counsellor do occur in the cross-cultural situation. The more frequent difficulties are discussed and recommendations for ways in which counsellors and counsellor educators can meet this challenge are discussed.

Résumé

Il devient de plus en plus impérieux, spécialement au sein de la société canadienne, d'acquérir des habiletés particulières en vue de travailler auprès de clients qui, d'un point de vue racial ou culturel, sont différents de leur conseiller. La relation de nature interculturelle est effectivement problématique à la fois pour le client et le conseiller. On trouve dans le présent article une discussion des difficultés les plus fréquentes ainsi que des recommandations quant à diverses façons auxquelles peuvent recourir les conseillers et les formateurs en vue de relever un tel défi.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the problems which occur when the culturally or racially dissimilar individual comes in contact with a counsellor, especially a counsellor who is a member of the majority group. The contact may occur between the client and a counsellor in a variety of settings e.g. school, manpower offices, social service agencies etc. Some recommendations for ways in which counsellors can better meet the needs of these clients are also presented.

Methods and means of counselling minority group clients have been less than satisfactory

(Ivey, 1980a; Ramcharan, 1975; Wolfgang, 1975). Sue (1981) points out that "a barrage of criticisms has been leveled against traditional counselling practices as being demeaning, irrelevant and oppressive toward the culturally different" (p. xi). As evidence of the inappropriateness of our conventional models in cross-cultural situations, it has been shown the approximately 50 percent of minority clients terminate counselling after the first interview (Sue, 1981). As the culture of the society changes, the role of the counsellor must change also. Inability to respond to the changing needs, especially those of the minority status client leads to what Wrenn (1962) has labelled cultural encapsulation of the counsellor.

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Regardless of how long they have lived in

this country various ethnic and racial groups are still considered to be minority group clients if they are perceived as being culturally or racially different from the members of the majority group. Thus a native Indian whose ancestors go back hundreds of years in this country and the recently arrived immigrant from Italy are seen as members of a distinct minority group and are therefore lumped into the same category.

The Canadian Context

In no country is the challenge greater for counsellors than in Canada where the society has committed itself to the development of a multicultural society.

In order to evaluate the need for cross-cultural counselling and to place it into perspective, it may be helpful to consider the following. In 1971 and 1972 close to a quarter of a million people immigrated to Canada and of that number approximately one half came from non-English speaking countries (World Almanac, 1974, p. 539). When the various urban settings are examined it is important to note that in Toronto alone "close to half the households were born outside Canada, another one fifth had at least foreign born parents, and only 29% had two Canadian-born parents" (Ramcharan, 1975, p. 95). When we add to these numbers the new Canadians who are English speaking, but come from non-white countries, the number of such Canadians who are included in the visually dissimilar category increases noticeably. Vancouver is not unlike Toronto and Montreal in some respects—Chadney (1977) estimated the East Indian population in Vancouver as 60,000. Cities like Montreal exist with five or six significant ethnic communities, each with its own culturally specific institutions and differing expectations of help-giving services (Westwood, 1982). The majority of these groups attend schools, which, for the most part, are institutions based upon the language and value focus of the two majority cultures and this fact places special responsibility on the school counsellors.

One of the practices which is most important for successful living in this society is that provided by the counsellor; whether the attention is toward educational, vocational or personal counselling. Therefore, these practices must be culturally appropriate in order to successfully meet the needs of the client (Marshall, 1979; Wolfgang, 1975). According to Ivey (1980b), "any positive mental health effort must be culturally appropriate" (p.5).

Typical Problems for the Minority Status Client

Awareness of the existence of the counsellor and the role of this individual in society is frequently a problem. Wolfgang (1975) has shown how it is that the minority group member has no reference for counselling. Wolfgang (1975) points out that this is often the case for the new Canadian who would not likely seek help from the counsellor or even know about counselling or guidance services. For instance, in some countries (such as Italy) guidance services have not been formally introduced into the schools (Wolfgang, 1975, p. 141). Not seeking contact with a counsellor is a common phenomenon on the part of many minority group members. Westwood and Massey (1982), who surveyed the expectations of East Indian parents and adolescents, found that frequently members of these communities not only had minimal contact with counsellors but in many cases these individuals had little or no information about what a counsellor does.

According to Anderson (1978), Sue and Sue (1977), and Ramcharan (1975) the quality of contact between the minority status client and counsellor is typically inferior to the quality of contact existing between counsellor and client of the same culture. The reasons for this are varied, but one of the main reasons centered around the perceived quality of the critical contact or the early stages in the counselling relationship. In order to be effective as a counsellor, it is necessary to be able to establish a trusting and workable relationship at the early stages of contact (Bloombaum, Yamamoto & James, 1968; Pedersen, 1977; Sue & Sue, 1977; Wolfgang, 1975). To achieve this type of relationship, the counsellor must know, and be perceived as knowing, about the client's personal experience (s) and the cultural context of the client. In addition to knowing about the other, awareness of one's own cultural or racial experience is also required. Only then is it possible to approach that which has been extensively written about in counselling theory — accurate empathy. A perception of empathy by the client, as displayed by the counsellor, is only possible when counsellors have been sensitized to their own reactions to differentness and possess significant knowledge about the distinct ethnic groups seeking counselling. At times the counsellor's personal reactions may interfere with the counselling process, i.e. the counsellor may come to the relationship with a different "world view" or differing attitudes. If we consider the aspect of "absorbed prejudices" on the part of the counsellor, it is easy to see how negative

perceptions may be elicited upon initial client contact. This can be very hazardous, especially when counsellors are not aware that they hold such prejudices. Vontress (1971) describes the spontaneous nature of this event in counselling. Knowing our attitudes and taking responsibility for them is a necessary first level of counsellor awareness. Negative countertransference on the part of the counsellor is examined by Bloombaum *et al.* (1968) in which the authors look at cultural stereotyping amongst psychotherapists.

Calia (1966) has shown that the counselling process as conventionally practiced tends to operate from a values base which does not apply to various ethnic and racial minorities. Some researchers and intercultural workers describe counselling process and practice as oriented toward a white, North American middle class bias (Davis, 1978; Pedersen, Lonner & Draguns, 1976; Sue & Sue, 1977; Wolfgang, 1975). For clients who sense the difference in value base between their expectations of how assistance is given and the typical manner in which it is presented, a perception of suspicion or mistrust can understandably develop towards counselling.

Another area of difficulty arising from the above situation concerns counsellors who may not be aware of the special problems which are encountered by clients – especially those who are new to the country. Wolfgang (1973) found that new Canadians (Italian students) felt they had less personal control over their lives than they did in their own culture.

For the majority of new immigrants, the language of the school is a second language. Even when we work with children who are first generation Canadian, there may be a tremendous difficulty in working with the families who speak little or no English. It is not arguable that counselling process is very linguistically bound specific – effective counselling is most likely when clients can speak to a counsellor in their first language.

Moving away from the problems for the counsellor in cross-cultural interviews, there are special problems for the client, which have been documented by Russel (1970). The dissimilar client frequently perceives the counsellor to be possessing distinct ethnic or racial biases (and these may be detrimental to the client). This awareness, by the client, often leads to terminating contact, avoidance of specific issues or general anxiety in the interview. Such negative transference by the client must be acknowledged and dealt with before counselling can continue. Thus we notice the transference problems can be

compounded when both client and counsellor bring this into the interview.

There are additional factors which influence the quality of the cross-cultural counselling process which will not be examined here. For a closer examination of some of these the reader is referred to some of the findings of Marsella and Pedersen (1981) and Sue (1981). Some suggestions for better meeting the needs of such client populations will now be discussed.

Recommendations for Counsellors and Counsellor Educators

There are two levels at which counsellor educators can begin to introduce changes in the training of the counsellors: a) at the initial training levels, whether it is the Diploma or Master's degree, and b) in the context of in-service programs for counsellors who have graduated and are practising in the field. In general the cross-cultural programs should include knowledge and information components, and analysis and evaluation of the issues and reactions to them. The programs should also include an experiential mechanism whereby the counsellor can come to know his/her own attitudes, feelings and absorbed prejudices. The above general objectives might be achieved in specific terms by doing the following.

1. Incorporate cross-cultural counselling theory (e.g. Pedersen, 1977; Sue, 1981) and practice in the training programs, as part of the expertise base needed by every counsellor working in a culturally diverse society.

2. Increase counsellor sensitivity to minority clients. This can be achieved by providing information about the history and common cultural mores of the minority groups in question. This is crucial because, as Davis (1978) has shown, people must acquire some specific knowledge about different groups in order to effect change.

3. Participating directly in the life of the families and other key institutions is another way of increasing counsellor sensitivity to minority clients (Westwood and Massey, 1982). Of course, the ideal way to enter into any other culture is to learn the language. The author recognizes that this is not always possible or practical, but in cases where the counsellor is dealing with different languages, and wants to do counselling in those languages, it is possible to involve cross-cultural workers as advocates for the client.

4. Include relevant practicum experiences. From the counsellor training point of view, a

good way to gain insight into the groups with which counsellors may be working is for practica and internship programs to arrange placements in relevant minority settings, e.g. immigrant services centres, storefront legal and medical centres, schools in communities with high density minority populations.

5. Educate counsellors to make themselves aware of cultural variations in social distance and expressive style. Ample research exists which indicates that much of the impact of communication is actually from the nonverbal behaviour, and not from the words (Mehrabian, 1972; Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967); by learning about the metacommunication of other cultures counsellors are able to have access to increased understanding of their clients – this is especially valuable when clients have difficulty with the majority language. According to Wolfgang (1975) the nonverbal behaviour of immigrants can be used as an index of assimilation, that is, as students begin to assimilate they frequently adopt the nonverbal style of the majority group. Marshall (1979) illustrates the need of respecting the modes of expressions across cultures. For instance, she found that the Asian women in her study all indicated that revealing one's feelings is foreign to the cultural norms of respect and politeness. How many approaches to counselling taught at universities begin with the assumption that clients should openly express their feelings? When we look at the feelings of "anger", "hurt" and negative feelings in general, Asians (according to Marshall, 1979) reported that it is customary to sense another's feelings, rather than for the person with the feelings to express them. If trust development is a universal goal for all forms of counselling, it certainly cannot happen in these types of situations. Negative emotions often become masked due to a desire for social pleasantness. The clients may see themselves as being respectful by concealing the expression of such feelings whereas counsellors may interpret this as resistance to their help.

6. Be aware that vocational counselling decisions are frequently susceptible to recommendations that handicap the minority status client. Lack of fluency in the majority language is frequently perceived by others as indicative of lower mental and scholastic ability in vocational programs than their English speaking counterparts. It is the counsellor who could ensure that the type of recommendations made are based on thorough evaluations which respect culture and language fair assessment techniques e.g. instruments that are not highly loaded on western middle class values.

7. Recognize the limitations imposed by counselling theories that are founded on

assumptions of individualism and freedom of choice. Marshall (1979) points out that this is frequently in direct contrast to the group oriented value systems central to many minority groups. For example choices in dating and marriage are strikingly different for an adolescent from English Canadian family than one from an East Indian family.

8. Focus on prevention as well as remediation. Counsellors can serve a preventive role by making contact with families, not only to increase their awareness, of the particular culture, as discussed earlier, but also to assess the degrees to which the family is in stress, primarily as it relates to adjustment to the host culture. Giordano (1973) and Allodi (1971) have presented evidence to show that often new Canadian families, in attempting to adjust to the new society, experience serious personal problems – especially between the adolescents and their parents. According to the authors cited, the family relationships deteriorate and social deviance increases. Counsellors who are attuned to this possibility could identify those particular families via their contact with the students at school. This type of early identification becomes part of a preventative intervention.

9. An ultimate, and perhaps the most immediate recommendation should be to encourage persons from the specific cultural group to become trained counsellors. This would seem to be the most preferable model of all, in that for many minority status clients, approaching and making contact with a counsellor who they perceive as ethnically or racially similar, is often easier (Goldstein, 1971). Counselling programs for women exist for this reason, or at least this is one of the major reasons often given. Increasing the match between counsellor and client appears important in view of what Arbuckle (1969) has suggested; that establishing a relationship characterized by mutual trust, acceptance and rapport is a difficult, if not impossible, task in cross-cultural situations.

Conclusion

The cultural and racial complexity of the Canadian society provides counselling with an enormous challenge to develop expertise for meeting diverse client needs effectively. Meeting this challenge will prevent the "dissimilar client" from becoming the "disadvantaged client." As a start towards achieving the goal of effective counselling of minority groups, it might be useful to attend to the typical problems encountered by people in minority groups receiving counselling and to follow the recommendations as outlined in this paper.

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