Multicultural Counselling

Introduction

Research shows clients from ethnic minority groups are the least likely to make use of counselling services. One explanation for this is that it is an ethnocentric activity, based on the values of the white middle classes, an approach which can alienate those from other cultures. A multicultural approach to counselling challenges the assumption that one style of interviewing is transferable to all clients. This section examines a theory of multicultural counselling; definitions; and models of multiculturalism; highlighting the implications these have for guidance practitioners.

Theory of multicultural counselling and therapy (MCT)

Most career counselling and guidance practitioners would readily acknowledge that each client is unique, and that individual differences must be accepted and respected. However, practice - based on theories taught during initial training and subsequently developed into 'action theories' in the field - often reflects the assumption that a particular interviewing approach is transferable across a wide range of clients. Multicultural counselling challenges this view.

Sue et al (1996) propose a theory of multicultural counseling and therapy (MCT). This is considered necessary because of the inadequacies of current theories informing current counselling practice. These theories operate from both explicit and implicit assumptions that guide their practical application, and so an `assumption audit' is presented as the starting point for the authors developing MCT as an essential starting point for understanding this new theory.

It’s suggested (p2) that we all conduct a `critical and independent audit' of assumptions which currently underlay our counselling practice, and compare it with the one presented below.

Underlying Assumptions:

- Current theories of counselling and psychotherapy inadequately describe, explain, predict and deal with current cultural diversity.
- Culture is complex but not chaotic.
- Diversification is occurring at such a rapid pace that mental-health professionals will increasingly come into contact with clients or client groups who differ from them racially, culturally and ethnically.
- Mental-health professionals are not adequately prepared to engage in multicultural practice.
- The traditional training models of professional schools contribute to encapsulation.
- A major paradigm shift is in process.
- Multiculturalism provides a fourth dimension to the three traditional helping orientations (psychodynamic, existential-humanistic and cognitive).
- Asian, African and other non-Western progenitors of counselling and psychotherapy have been trivialized.
- Individualism has dominated the mental-health field and is strongly reflected in counseling and psychotherapy.
- A culture-centred metatheory is viable.
- All learning occurs and identities are formed in a cultural context.
- Cultural identity is dynamic and changing.
- Unintentional racism is as serious as intentional racism.
- Multicultural training increased a counsellor's repertoire of skills and perspectives.
- Informal as well as formal counselling is important in many cultural contexts.
- Culture should be defined inclusively and broadly rather than narrowly.
- Understanding the cultural and sociopolitical context of a client's behaviour is essential to accurate assessment, interpretation and treatment.
- An adequate research methodology for incorporating culture must include both qualitative and quantitative elements.
- Increased self-awareness is an essential starting point in developing multicultural competence.
- The accumulation of relevant knowledge depends on a well-developed cultural awareness.
- The appropriate application of skills in multicultural settings depends on both cultural awareness and relevant knowledge.

Their theory is then developed around this set of propositions.

**What is multicultural counselling?**

A broad definition of the term 'multiculturalism' embraces a wide range of social variables or differences. For example:

- gender,
- sexual preference,
- disability,
- social class,
- age,
- religion,
- ethnicity.

Pederson (1994) proposed a broad definition of multicultural counselling which includes:

- 'ethnographic variables such as ethnicity, nationality, religion and language; demographic variables such as age, gender and place of residence; status variables such as social, educational and economic; and affiliations including both formal affiliations to family or organizations and informal affiliations to ideas and a lifestyle' (p229).

In this broad definition, each person has many different cultures or identities with each identity becoming relevant at different times and places. He argues that multiculturalism emphasises both the way we are different from and similar to other people. It challenges those who have presumed that differences don't matter as well as those who have over emphasized differences (often perpetuating stereotypes).

Ivey et al. (1997, p134) describe multicultural counselling as a 'metatheoretical approach that recognises that all helping methods ultimately exist within a cultural context'. They go on to argue that multiculturalism:

- starts with awareness of differences among and within clients;
- stresses the importance of family and cultural factors affecting the way clients view the world;
- challenges practitioners, theoreticians and researchers to rethink the meaning of counselling, and pay attention to family and cultural concerns.

By these definitions, multiculturalism has relevance for every client presenting for careers counselling and guidance in the UK.

**Origins and relevance of multicultural counselling**

Bimrose (1996, p238) traces the origins of multicultural counselling to the American Civil Rights
movement in the mid 1970s. Around this time, questions were asked about the groups of people who never requested counselling, or, if they came along for a first session, did not return. A clear pattern emerged. Clients from minority ethnic groups were the least likely to request and/or persevere with counselling.

The most widely accepted explanation is that counselling (and guidance) practice is an ethnocentric activity. Many authors (e.g. Ridley, 1995, Lago & Thompson 1996, Sue et al, 1996 and Sue & Sue, 1999) have argued that mainstream approaches are white, middle class activities that operate with many distinctive values and assumptions. For example, that clients will be future and action orientated. Such approaches are ethnocentric or ‘culturally encapsulated’ (Wrenn, 1985), holding at their centre a notion of normality derived from white culture, which is irrelevant to many clients and has the potential for alienating them.

This explanation of why ethnically different clients find mainstream counselling unhelpful has equal relevance to other client differences such as gender, sexual preference and disability. The central message is clear - caution needs to be exercised when applying mainstream approaches to diverse groups of clients.

**Implications for practice**

Because a multicultural approach to counselling is relatively new, the implications for practice are still being developed. There is some agreement, however, that whilst maintaining the integrity of the distinctive new approach, multicultural counselling should strive to select and build on the best of current counselling practice. Sue et al (1995, p633) developed a `conceptual framework for cross-cultural competencies' which can help with this. It consists of a three by three matrix in which it is claimed most cross-cultural skills can either be organized or developed.

A selection of skills, techniques and strategies are presented, below, within the framework developed by Sue and Sue (1995), who identified the competencies required by the culturally skilled counsellor as being:

- awareness of own assumptions, values and biases;
- understanding the world view of the culturally different client;
- developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques.

**Increasing self-awareness**

Many writers in the area of multicultural counselling advocate the need for all practitioners to start on a continual process of multicultural self-awareness.

- The first task is to think about yourself;
- the second to identify the values of the dominant culture in which you practise counselling or communication;
- the third is to examine alternative value orientations.

Bimrose (1998) discusses more fully exercises and schema which have been developed to assist with this type of self-examination. For example, Locke (1992, p2) suggests that practitioners work through the following questions:

- What is my cultural heritage? What was the culture of my parents and my grandparents? With what cultural group(s) do I identify?
- What is the cultural relevance of my name?
- What values, beliefs, opinions and attitudes do I hold that are consistent with the dominant culture? Which are inconsistent? How did I learn these?
- How did I decide to become a practitioner? What cultural standards were involved in the process? What do I understand to be the relationship between culture and counselling?
- What unique abilities, aspirations, expectations, and limitations do I have that might influence
my relations with culturally diverse individuals?

If you are able to compare your answers to some or all of these questions with others, then the effectiveness of the learning process is likely to be increased. All the questions have value, though the second question often has most impact, perhaps because it highlights the extent to which the cultural conventions surrounding the naming system of the dominant society are taken for granted by acculturated members of that society.

**Developing knowledge and understanding**

An exercise which can be used to gain knowledge and understanding of difference is a role play exercise adapted from a conference workshop run by Jackson (1995). The exercise requires a training group of three people, approximately two hours when these three people can work together on this exercise, a suitable room and some individual research time. Jackson identified two main purposes of the exercise:

- First, to develop empathic understanding by enabling you to attempt to discover what it might feel like to be a person who comes from a different background.
- Second, to enable you to begin to identify some practice guidelines that counsellors might follow to enhance their effectiveness with clients who are different from themselves.

In preparation for the role-play, select someone from a culturally different group about which feel you are currently ignorant or have an inadequate understanding but would like to gain a more thorough understanding. It is important to define 'culturally' in this context in the broadest possible sense (that is, to include social class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, etc.). As thoroughly as time permits, research the background of the people who come from that background. The research process should harness a range of resources, including someone from your chosen group.

Once the individual research has been completed, the training process involves working in your training group for approximately one and a half hours. During this time each member of the group will perform in turn tasks related to the three roles of client, counsellor and observer.

**Client:** for approximately fifteen minutes, you have an opportunity to be a person from a group that is culturally different from your own. Come prepared to present a problem or concern to a counsellor or health professional who would like to help you. Identify some realistic concern that the person you have chosen actually has had or might reasonably be expected to have.

**Counsellor:** you will be asked by a 'client' to help resolve some difficulty that will be presented to you. If you wish, you may ask your 'observer' for ideas and suggestions on how to proceed.

**Observer:** you will be available to the counsellor to offer ideas and suggestions. After the role play, you will lead the feedback session which should identify the most helpful statements or actions performed by the counsellor.

Suggested guidelines:

- **Introductions:** as client, introduce yourself to your two colleagues (the name of your person along with relevant cultural information). (2/3 minutes in total)
- **Role play:** conduct a brief counselling session in which the client presents a concern and the counsellor attempts to be as helpful as possible. (approximately 15 minutes)
- **Feedback:** review the session with the purpose of identifying the most helpful actions. All three members of the training group should contribute their observations. (approximately 10 minutes)

Finally, after you have each completed all three role plays, observations should be pooled so that the most useful practices can be identified.

**Skills for multicultural competence**

In addition to working towards a greater cultural self-awareness and developing your knowledge and
understanding of client difference, practitioners need to think about the way in which their skills should to be adapted or changed to accommodate the particular needs of certain client groups.

Ivey et al. (1997) and Ivey (1994) suggest that culturally appropriate nonverbal behaviour is crucial to successful counselling outcomes. Ivey (1994, p75) advocates that all practising counsellors 'begin a lifetime of study of nonverbal communication patterns and their variations'. Various categories of nonverbal behaviour are identified and some cultural implications for each category (e.g. eye contact, posture, touching, vocal tracking) are discussed (Ivey, 1994, p29).

Non-verbal communication provides one example of skill that can be easily examined for bias and modified. An effective method of enhancing your competence in this area is practising with a friend or trusted colleague.

- Select various combinations of non verbal communication (for example, eye contact, posture and hand gestures.
- Try to demonstrate effective listening without using the non verbal behaviour that you would normally use in your counselling or communication. (For example, if you normally try to sustain eye contact, you could try communicating without eye contact, look away or down at the floor). How did you feel? Ask the other person how they felt.

Is it possible to adopt different styles of non verbal communication and still listen effectively?

**Conclusion**

The current policy emphasis on social exclusion and equal opportunities in guidance and counselling highlights the need for professional practice that is responsive to and accommodates these important client issues in an effective manner. Multicultural counselling represents a relatively new approach, offering practical methods designed to enhance practice that can be integrated into current approaches.

**References**


**EGCRF - Multicultural Guidance and Counselling in Europe**

From here you can follow a link within our sister site the European Guidance and Counselling Research Forum. This provides details of the Multicultural Guidance and Counselling in Europe seminar that was held at the University of Derby on May 24th 2005, together with links to related resources.