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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the effectiveness of cross-cultural counseling and advocates a "culture-using" counseling perspective as an alternative to the "etic-emic" approach. The author argues that, currently, counseling is treated as the "given"; culture is treated as a variable in counseling effectiveness; and counseling is never evaluated as a cultural phenomenon in itself. The culture-using perspective assumes that: (1) counseling is Western society's form of the helping relationship; (2) qualitative differences in the human experience are most likely represented by culture; and (3) the culture that wishes to adopt the counseling framework is aware of and can articulate its own unique cultural experience. (JCD)

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COUNSELING ACROSS CULTURES: A CRITIQUE

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Counseling Across Cultures: A Critique

A critical review of the recent attempts to counsel across cultures is well overdue. Within the last decade there has been a growing number of journal publications, books, conferences and training grants directed at exploring counseling across cultures. This surge of interest is also overdue for it represents a concern which cannot be ignored in the delivery of education and social services, i.e. cultural differences. Although the bulk of the attention has been put on counseling Blacks, the Asian American cultures have not been ignored. Articles (Tinloy, 1978), books (Sue & Wagner, 197), conferences (Sue & Chin, 1976), and training programs (National Asian American Psychology Training Center, San Francisco) have all recently appeared dealing specifically with counseling the Asian American. Since these cross-cultural endeavors are such an essential element to the counseling profession, they should withstand being another passing fad. However, if there is not some mature developments in the realms of metatheory and theory, cross-cultural counseling may find itself stuck in a pool of data without a sufficient theoretical framework to guide its interpretation and growth. The purpose of this critique is to stimulate thought around some basic issues which, I feel, cannot be avoided in attempts to counsel across cultures.

The claim that a person can counsel across cultures is a bold one. To assert that a counselor can step out of his/her's culture so effectively to assist a person of another culture is truly a hopeful ideal. Quite bluntly, the effectiveness of aiding people within a culture with their interpersonal problems has been minimal. Psychologists, (or anyone in our culture for that matter), who share a common culture, simply do not know very much about mental health and the etiology of abnormality, let alone the definitions of those terms. Efforts to begin stretching ourselves to encompass other cultures in our psychological endeavors must have resulted from factors other than our brilliance. My skepticism is not so blind that it disallows the possibility of inquiry. However, what is certainly needed is some awareness of the compounding of philosophical problems in this endeavor labelled cross-cultural counseling.

The starting point for almost all reviews of this type has been to try and escape from the "etic-emic" phenomena of human thought. This issue was best described by Kluckhohn and Murray (1953):

> "Every person is like all other human beings in some ways, like some others in other respects and finally like no one else."

The first third of this description of the human condition represents the etic, the univeral or the aspects of human experience that all men share. The last two thirds have

been labelled the emic, the relative or the characteristics that make groups and individuals unique from one another. Traditional psychological research has focused on the first half of the emic, or the group specific characteristics. With the rise of cross-cultural concerns, some psychologists concentrated on the etics of human experience. Very promptly they took a leap of faith and imposed their conceptual categories and constructions onto other cultures. Their academic justification was to "objectively" explore the universality of a theory, that is, if a theory held up cross-culturally then it was assumed to be approaching absolu and universal truth. There has been less imperialistic approaches in cross-cultural psychology. For example, in ethnographic psychology, rather than stand outside the culture and impose conceptual etics, attempts are made to actually enter the culture (or, "come out of a culture") and explicate the relations of psychological phenomena using that culture's terms.

> "Cognitive universals may be demonstrated and socialization practices certainly control the organization of activities, but a firm understanding of what people are doing, what their activities are, is the starting poing of analysis." (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition (LCHC), 1979)

However, I shall argue that all attempts at cross-cultural research necessarily affirms a conceptual etic and any appearance of emics is purely artificial. The best way to defend my claim is to react to the literature.

Brislin, Lonner and Thorndike's definition of cross-cultural psychology is, "the empirical study of members of various cultural groups ... who have had different experiences that lead to predictable and significant differences in behavior.", (1973). But how can we even talk about those differences in behavior without imposing an etic implicitly contained in our language and thought? The very use of the word "different" implies that there must be something with which the experiences or behavior differs from. There must be an experience or behavior familiar to the researcher from whichhe can understand what the differences are. In another way, any attempt to construe human differences (i.e. the emic) ends up only describing the quantitative differences within an "imposed etic". That is, to speak of differences between cultures is to talk of how people differ in degree along some dimension. This dimension is the imposed etic. Given this state of affairs it is no wonder why researchers and counselors are exhorted to "strive for an equilibrium between the etic and the emic" (Draguns, 1979). The use of the word "equilibrium" reveals the underlying conception of human experience always being on a continuum of sorts. This continuum is, by definition, an etic of the user's language and thought, and it is a continuum on which it appears people may differ, but where differences are really only how people are the same to varying degrees.

If one accepts my premise, it is not too difficult to see that we are faced with the core of the etic-emic dilemna. There is no way to talk about human difference without imposing a conceptual etic, at which point we lose the "difference" we sought to explicate. In other words, we are, by the nature of our thought and language, limited to expressing the emic of human experience in terms of the varying degrees of a comparative continuum. We can, however, appreciate the possibility of true human difference, by which I mean the "qualitative differences" among people and groups which loses their quality when described. Why is this experience so resistant to description? Once you open your mouth to begin talking of this difference you must fall back on some verbal category with which to contrast it with, which in turn only serves to swallow the qualitative difference and make it a quantifiable one along some dimension. I am assuming that such qualitative differences in human experience exist and that the use of another language may be necessary for its expression. It is, of course, equally plausible that all of human difference is simply a matter of degree on various universal dimensions or etics (in which case, there would be no problems). Another example of my reactions may serve to clarify this argument:

> "... there is no agreed upon definition of culture in any academic discipline that psycholo-

> gists can draw on as a means of specifying what they mean when they speak of culture as an independent variable that can lead to predictions. Insofar as there is agreement (e.g. among anthropologists, to whom the psychologist typically turns as a source of definitional warrant) between those who are concerned with the study of culture emphasize the patterning of ideas, institutions and artifacts provided by the group in question." (LCHC, 1979)

There are two aspects of this quote I would like to highlight. First, the use of "culture" as an independent variable that can lead to prediction is the most common definition held by researchers and counselors. To approach culture as simply one more variable, or group of variables, to be included in an understanding of psychological phenomena and behavior is a bold inference that one's own conception of humanity is universal. That is, culture is used as a broad term to encompass all the variables that lead to how people differ in degree along some dimension chosen for making comparisons. Therefore, the challenge is to identify the person's culture, demonstrate its effect on some dependent measure, and "Presto!" you have improved the power of your predictions and the efficiency of your counseling. It is unfortunate that there is no hint of appreciating culture as representing a competing view of (or qualitatively different view of) the human condition. Rather, it is simply labelled as an independent variable and subsumed under you own particular world view.

Secondly, if culture is, as anthropologists say, a patterned set of experiences produced by the group in question, then "any attempts to unpackage this item of curiosity may destroy the network of relations which gave the culture its (packaged) meaning in the first place." (LCHC, 1979). This is essentially a restatement of what I said earlier. To even begin conceptualizing qualitative differences leads only to quantifying them along one's own conceptual (and implicitly etic) framework. Note that this limitation also exists for the person who attempts to step out of his own culture and communicate it to another; e.g. the Chinese scholar visiting America to explicate Chinese culture. He is also confronted with taking his experience and finding English words with which to describe them. (I hope that I have pointed out that it is more than just a feeling that leads one to conclude that full equivalence is not attained in translation.)

Within the etic-emic dilemna of human thought, counseling across cultures is almost a theoretical impossibility. What is the option? Rather than construing the counselor as attempting to step out of his world view, why not simply have the opposite occur? That is, the client receives help by stepping out of his culture and entering the world of the counselor. It should not be as profound as it seems in this context, but is not this a more realistic conception of what happens in a cross-cultural helping relationship in

America? Kluckholn and Murray (1953) defined culture as "a great storehouse of ready-made solutions to problems which human animals are wont to encounter." Counseling in Western society can therefore be conceived as "a cultural solution to the problem of problem-solving." (Sundberg, 1979). For a person from another culture to enter counseling is to make an assimilative step into Western culture; it is expressing a willingness (or a necessity) to consider the problem-solving techniques and its solutions this culture has to offer. (The parallel experience for the American is to visit a herbalist or guru in an attempt to solve his/her's depression.)

Thus far I have argued that cross-cultural counseling is best conceived as "cultures entering counseling". This conclusion is the result of one basic premise: due to the constraints of our language, qualitative differences are resistent to description and conceptualization. This assertion led to two observations: first, any efforts to cross cultures conceptually only ends up as unicultural description, and second, since counseling itself is a cultural phenomena (and a relatively new form of the helping relationship in American culture) any efforts to counsel across cultures, in the final analysis, is assimilative in nature. My conclusions cannot be taken lightly since what they have done has been to water down most cross-cultural research and accused current efforts at

cross-cultural counseling as doing nothing more than increasing the effectiveness of a assimilative institution. It is ironic that one of the main forces in the birth of cross-cultural interests in counseling was to move away from the blatant assimilative tendencies in traditional counseling techniques, while all that has really happened is for it to become more subtle. A closer look at these latter efforts to counsel across cultures will demonstrate an alternative perspective.

Up to the present time, the route taken to make counseling culturally sensitive has been from the counselor's perspective. In other words, counseling is taken as the "given" (where one begins and ends inquiry) and culture is treated as just another variable to be taken into account when seeking to increase counselor effectiveness. Counseling then, never loses or is evaluated in terms of, its characteristics which make it a cultural phenomena in itself. This approach was the most natural for Western professionals, but it certainly failed to recognize the implications of human difference. If culture is recognized to represent a possibly qualitative different view of humanity then an alternative perspective to view counseling and culture becomes obvious.

My suggestions is simply that we start from culture and let it remold counseling in its own terms. Rather than starting with counseling, let us take culture as

the "given" and allow it to do with counseling what it sees fit. If a culture wants to adopt the Western "dress" of the helping relationship it need only take that aspect of counseling that characterizes it as a helping institution, and not necessarily its working premises. The working premises of counseling are those beliefs about the nature of the human condition, the mechanisms of change, and the values or goals of the process. For a culture to use counseling, these working premises, or internal structures, need to be defined, reviewed and evaluated in light of that culture's unique experience. This perspective allows cultures (and individuals) the option to use counseling within their own framework or belief systems. The imperialistic nature of attempting to counsel across cultures and the assimilative nature of cultures entering counseling is not necessary.

What exactly are the assumptions of this "culture using counseling" perspective? Although most of them have been referred to already in the context of my argument, it will not hurt to reiterate them here for clarity and expansion. The first is that counseling is Western society's form of the helping relationship. Although there may be similiar institutions in other cultures, to begin describing the nature of this similarity falls into the conceptual dilemna I pointed out earlier (e.g. Torrey, 1972). The second assumption is at the core of

my conceptual "box": qualitative difference does occur in human experience (with culture being one of the most likely candidates to represent such a difference).

My third assumption is that the "culture" that wishes to adopt the counseling framework of the helping process, is aware of and can verbalize its own unique cultural experience. This awareness is a necessity for outlining those internal structures of their counseling model. Unfortunately, most of the ethnic minority students and professionals of America, who are being challenged to remold counseling services, have not adequately described their own cultural experience. It is naive to think that there will be a unified conception of the beliefs and values characteristic of a culture, thus the central tendency must be used as the representative for the building of models. However, it must be emphasized that model building for counseling is not for the purpose of establishing a blindly applied technique but rather to increase the sensitivities of the individual helper to the problem situation(s).

In closing, I would like to refer to a work by Takeo Doi, a Japanese psychiatrist who was trained in the West. His book, "The Anatomy of Dependence" is a reflection of a "culture using counseling" perspective. Utilizing the Japanese concept "amae", Doi attempts to outline the nature of Japanese relationships and points out how ignorance

of this concept renders Western understanding of the Japanese "psyche" and relations grossly distorted. It is important that one recognizes that "amae" resists literal translation and must remain a independent concept, resistant to English comparative etics.

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