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# Deconstructing Counseling in a Cultural Context

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Counseling psychology has been encapsulated in ethnocentric assumptions that are taken to be universal. The theories, research, and practice of counseling psychology, as a specialized profession, originate in the United States but are assumed to be universally applicable. When transported to other cultures where the field of psychology in general, and counseling psychology in particular, is fledging, it is simply transposed. There has often been little regard as to the applicability of the theories and practice.

Early attempts to understand cross-cultural perspectives of counseling adopted the imported etic approach. Similarities and differences between cultures on a particular psychological model, concept, or technique that was developed in the West were compared. These comparisons remained on a descriptive level. There has often been little query on the adequacy, sufficiency, or relevance of the imported etic—or universal—model itself.

In this International Forum, the cultural context of counseling is highlighted. The culture question often confronts non-Western counselors who reflect on the meaning of their professional experience. The editor and series coeditors of the journal, however, challenge all counseling psychologists to be concerned with the culture question.

## THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF COUNSELING

Counseling, like all behaviors, takes place in a cultural context. Cultural differences occur not only between societies, but also within societies where ethnicity, gender, social class, and other subcultures interact. Understanding the cultural context of counseling expands the traditional framework of Western theories and practice. Pedersen (1991) proposed multiculturalism as the “fourth force” in counseling, in addition to psychodynamic, behavioral, and humanistic models. The multicultural perspective includes dimensions

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that are unique to a particular culture as well as universal dimensions that are shared across cultures.

In this International Forum, the invited articles not only provide a cultural perspective to learn about counseling psychology in a specific culture; they also provide the context to understand the meaning of counseling itself as a form of formal interaction in which psychological service is offered. The meaning of counseling may seem obvious to American psychologists. The understanding of its meaning by American clients is assumed. In another cultural context, however, counseling may imply a different nature of relationship to both the provider and the recipient. Counseling needs to be deconstructed in the context of the culture in which it is offered.

In the deconstruction process, we discard our assumptions that have been taken for granted as part of our Western-based professional training. After we return to the basics about the goals, functions, conditions, and process of counseling, we can reconsider these basics in the specific cultural context in which counseling is applied. Only then can counseling be meaningful and relevant.

In this review, I will illustrate the cultural context of counseling psychology in relation to the conceptualization of psychological problems, use of assessment, therapeutic approaches and techniques, and the development of the profession itself in other countries. The importance of the cultural dimension in counseling in these aspects will be demonstrated.

### **CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS**

Counseling psychology models are based on Western theories of psychopathology. Cheung (1998a) outlined the relationship between culture and psychopathology. In essence, Cheung suggested that culture generates stress and problems. Culture defines what constitutes problems and explains the nature and cause of these problems. Culture also prescribes the selection of solutions for, or intervention in, these problems (D. W. Sue, 1978; D. W. Sue & Sue, 1990).

Poasa, Mallinckrodt, and Suzuki (2000 [this issue]) compared the conceptualization of problems and attributions of blame and responsibility of students in the United States, Western Samoa, and American Samoa. U.S. students tend to attribute blame to internal, global, stable character traits of a person. They use a "linear thought process" (p. 52) to assign blame to a single person and would resolve the problem by punishing the person. Samoan students attribute blame to "external, situation-specific, and relatively changeable factors" (p. 52). They view problems as having multiple causes and dis-

tribute attributions of blame in a nonlinear fashion. They tend to use resolutions that preserve relationship harmony. These cultural differences are explained in terms of individualistic versus collectivistic cultures.

Similar tendencies to attribute problems to external and situation-specific causes have been found in studies of Chinese students and psychiatric patients (Cheung, 1984, 1985, 1995). The Chinese tend to perceive multiple causes of their psychological problems. They express their psychological distress in somatic terms when they communicate with medical professionals. This mode of expression has led Western-trained practitioners to suspect that the Chinese tend to somatize their psychological problems, implying that they deny or repress their psychological problems. Somatization, in an ethnocentric, Western model, is construed as the dichotomous antithesis of psychologization, which is considered the appropriate mode of manifestation for emotional distress. The dichotomization of the body and the mind in somatization attributions is similar to the linear, dichotomous, and monotheistic thinking processes adopted by American students in Poasa et al.'s (2000) study. These thinking processes reflect the assumptions in the Western scientific tradition and the Western biomedical model of pathology.

Cultural differences between counselors' and clients' beliefs about the causes, nature, and solutions of psychological problems affect the outcome of treatment. Take the example of the somatization tendency among Chinese clients: Ethnocentric Western-trained counselors may pathologize the tendency to present psychological distress as somatic complaints. They may miss important cues conveyed by these clients, which could be used as leads to address their distress; for example, attending to the somatic concerns may legitimize the clients' calls for attention to their psychological distress.

Similarly, cross-cultural differences in the emphasis on independence versus interdependence affect counseling effectiveness. In a collectivistic culture, the emphasis on interdependence or relational harmony may be considered a sign of social maturity. In an individualistic culture, on the other hand, it may be construed as an indication of overconformity and a lack of individuation. Counselors who try to encourage clients coming from a collectivistic culture to confront authority figures directly may jeopardize the clients' networks of relationships.

In cross-cultural research, salient indigenous, or emic, constructs are examined, and the nomological networks of these constructs are explored. For example, in cross-cultural studies of psychopathology, culture-related syndromes drew the attention of early researchers. Cheung (1998a) suggested that the early interest in culture-bound syndromes may have originated from the "voyeuristic interest on folk illnesses in exotic cultures" (p. 37). However, by

examining how cultural contexts affect the conceptualization and manifestation of these syndromes, we not only expand our knowledge of aberrant phenomena unfamiliar to Western models of psychopathology, but also gain a better understanding of the cultural contexts of the conventional models of psychopathology themselves. (p. 39)

Even a construct with the same label may construe different meanings among cultures. Slaney, Chadha, Mobley, and Kennedy (2000 [this issue]) explored the meaning of perfectionism in Asian Indians and compared the conceptualization of the construct to a Western perspective. Perfectionism, in the context of the Hindu religion in India, is viewed in terms of a moral universe in which one's thoughts and actions determine one's present and future condition (karma). The final destiny transcends earthly requirements or achievements and liberates the person from the cycle of life and death (reincarnation) to reach an awareness of God (nirvana).

This conceptualization of perfectionism contrasts vastly from that found in the Western psychological literature. Slaney and Johnson (1992) outlined the nomological network of the construct and designed the Almost Perfect Scale (APS), which includes measures of high standards, orderliness, relationship problems, anxiety, and procrastination. They later found, however, that perfectionists may not be characterized by the negative traits of anxiety, procrastination, or having relationship difficulties (Johnson & Slaney, 1996).

Slaney et al. (2000) studied the cross-cultural similarities and differences between Americans' and Asian Indians' constructs of perfectionism. They administered the APS to university students in India and subjected the responses to a confirmatory factor analysis based on the factor structure found in an earlier American sample. Although the authors claim that the factor structure of the American sample provides a good fit for the Indian data, the confirmatory factor analysis results are actually not very impressive. The goodness-of-fit index and adjusted-goodness-of-fit index, at .84 and .83, respectively, fall below most standard criteria for a good model fit. The factor loadings for the Indian students are also not as high as those obtained for the American students. The authors' intention may have been to show cross-cultural similarities in the way that the two samples of students conceptualize perfectionism and to show that the Western construct has meanings in India. By using an imported etic test, the APS, they were able to find some overlap in the underlying dimensions.

A more fundamental issue, which has not been addressed by Slaney et al. (2000), is whether the APS is sufficient to tap the construct domain for the Indian students. The construction of the APS has not encompassed the conceptualization of perfectionism in the Hindu context. Instead of claiming a confirmation of the factor structure of the American sample, the weak results

obtained by Slaney et al. may be reinterpreted to illustrate this insufficiency. Other indigenous constructs may be needed to strengthen the construct domain of perfectionism for the Indian students.

In the second study reported in Slaney et al.'s (2000) article, interviews were used to extract the underlying meaning of perfectionism in the self-perception of Indian students. This method attempts to generate open-ended responses presumably without being biased by a structured test. However, the selection of the five participants from academic and professional fields would have biased the focus of the discussion toward activities in these areas, not the moral universe that is emphasized in the Hindu context. The authors admitted that the interview questions were developed from a Western perspective. It is unclear whether the interview protocol would have guided the participants to discuss moral dimensions or whether the framework for content analysis would have incorporated the Hindu perspective. From a theoretical as well as a methodological standpoint, it is important to recognize a culturally embedded concept from an indigenous context. Slaney et al.'s study falls short in this respect.

### CROSS-CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

Assessment is an important component of the counseling process. It is an area that deserves great attention in cross-cultural counseling. In many parts of the world, psychological assessment has been imported from Western countries. English-language psychological tests are translated into the local language. They are often applied without regard for cross-cultural equivalence, relevance, or validity.

It is interesting that the issue of cross-cultural assessment has not been addressed by any of the five international articles. Although assessment across cultures has been discussed extensively by cross-cultural psychologists, this important issue has not been given adequate attention by counseling psychologists. Leong (1986) suggested caution in the use of diagnostic and personality tests with Asian Americans and pointed to the need for culture-specific norms. However, attention to international applications has been paid to only a few standardized tests, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) (Butcher, 1996).

Cheung (1996, 1998b) discussed the advantages and limitations of translating and adapting instruments from the West. With good research to compile local norms and to establish cross-cultural equivalence, an imported etic test can take advantage of the wealth of evidence accumulated to support the conceptual and psychometric properties of the original test. The use of a com-

mon and equivalent instrument also facilitates cross-cultural comparisons of the constructs being measured by the instrument. However, cultural differences have been identified in the average scores on diagnostic instruments between the original normative sample and the local respondents. Counselors should be aware of the meaning of these score differences and avoid clinical interpretations based on the original norms, which may result in overestimating the psychopathology of individuals from different cultures.

As shown in Slaney et al.'s (2000) use of the APS, the use of a translated test may ignore important, emic constructs that are specific to a particular culture. Without these indigenous dimensions, the interpretation of the assessment would be incomplete (Cheung, 1998b). There is a need for tests that include important, culture-specific domains in addition to culture-comparable constructs if the tests are intended to provide reliable and valid assessment for people of that culture.

### **THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES AND TECHNIQUES**

The literature on cross-cultural counseling has given more attention to therapeutic approaches and techniques (Leong, 1986; Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimble, 1981; D. W. Sue & Sue, 1990; S. Sue & Zane, 1987). The use of Western models of counseling in other cultures may be examined in terms of their accessibility, suitability, and efficacy (P.W.L. Leung & Lee, 1996). Although the literature generally supports the cultural relevance of these Western models, attention has been drawn to the consideration of counselor and client characteristics as well as process variables.

An important factor to consider in the evaluation of the cross-cultural application is the adequacy of the training of the counselor, an issue to which I will return in the next section. Here, we should be aware of the possibility that cross-cultural effectiveness of particular counseling approaches or techniques may be confounded with the inadequate or insufficient training of the local counselors. The adequacy of training of the counselors has to be ascertained before the suitability of the counseling approach can be assessed.

Examination of culture and counseling has led to interest in indigenous treatment approaches in non-Western cultures. The various forms of "quiet therapies" from Japan, such as Morita therapy, Naikan (introspection) therapy, and Zen meditation, have received more attention (Reynolds, 1980). Other forms of folk therapies such as shamanism and divination (Tseng & McDermott, 1981) have also been examined. These indigenous approaches, however, have remained "exotic" forms of treatment. There is little integration of these approaches into the universal domains of counseling.

Pedersen (1991) has incorporated culture into the generic theory of counseling to explain counseling relationships in general. The counseling process can be used as a means to understand the cultural dynamics in interpersonal relationships. A creative application of traditional Western counseling techniques to explain culture is found in the article by Marchetti-Mercer and Cleaver (2000 [this issue]). Techniques of family therapy are extended to illustrate cultural perspectives in counselor training in South Africa.

Culture and family are closely linked. Cultural identities and values are often learned within the context of the family. Family dynamics also provide relevant perspectives for understanding cultural similarities and differences. As Marchetti-Mercer and Cleaver (2000) point out, "families are very powerful contexts for our trainees and can be successfully used as contexts of positive change, especially with regard to prejudices and negative stereotyping" (p. 78). They extended the techniques of genograms and family sculpting, derived from family therapy, to improve the cross-cultural understanding of multiethnic counselors. Genograms provide a method for examining the role of the individual within the family context. Sculpting enables the trainee to experience a variety of feelings brought about by family interactions. The trainees broke down the prejudices and preconceived ideas they had about one another by becoming part of the families of fellow trainees. Cultural similarities and differences can be appreciated through the use of counseling techniques.

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Counseling, as a profession, is developing at different stages in non-Western countries. This trade issue has to be considered in terms of the different social, economic, and cultural contexts.

Counseling requires a level of professional training based on the scientific discipline of psychology. Acceptance of this profession, a recent import to many countries, lies in its effectiveness—compared to competing, indigenous treatments—in addressing local needs. The recognition of the profession is reflected in the training requirements, control on the qualifications, the degree of specialization, and the remuneration for the professionals.

In the United States, counseling psychology is a highly specialized division in the psychology profession. Counseling psychology covers a wide range of fields, including school and personnel guidance, vocational rehabilitation, and psychological adjustment. Specialized training is expected of counseling psychologists.

In countries where the field of psychology is not well established, counseling may be provided by a range of professionals or paraprofessionals

working in different fields. They may or may not have specific training in psychology or counseling. Their perceptions of their roles may be very different from the perceptions of those from established specialties. S. A. Leung, Guo, and Lam (2000 [this issue]) examined the recent development of counseling in universities in China. In a country where psychology is not yet developed widely, counselors in China are mainly motivated practitioners with little training. Without the theoretical background, the counselors acquire their skills through nonformal channels such as reading, experience, and short training courses. For the counselors, practical training is regarded as the most urgent need. An issue of concern here is the confusion of the roles of psychologists, technicians, and allied professionals.

To develop the profession, fundamental issues have to be considered. Having identified the need for counseling services for university students, one should determine whether, and under what conditions, specialists are needed in the long run. Issues of professionalism such as qualifications and training can then be addressed in the context of the country.

The professional development of counseling psychology in Israel has taken on a very different appearance (Barak & Golan, 2000 [this issue]). Psychology, as a profession, is much more developed there and enjoys a respected status in field practice and in scientific conduct. The unique psychological problems encountered in Israel are generally nonpsychopathological in nature. These problems of coping, including continuous security threats, mass immigration, minority populations, *kibbutz* living, and religiosity, call for the services of counseling psychologists for normal people. However, as the traditional practitioners are trained in clinical psychology programs, there is resistance to the establishment of a counseling psychology specialty. Psychologists in Israel can learn from the professional rivalry in other countries and turn to address the fundamental issues. As Barak and Golan (2000) conclude, "it seems that constructive collaboration among Israeli psychological specialties could best serve actual societal needs and the need for excellence in professional conduct (p. 111)."

## CONCLUSION

As counseling psychology is transported to other cultures, we need to address the fundamental issues of counseling by whom, counseling for whom, and counseling for what. The five articles in this International Forum illustrate that in cultures where counseling psychology is not as well developed as in the United States, we cannot take these fundamental issues for granted. Collectively, these articles can serve the purpose of the International Forum—to continually assess the cultural validity and cross-cultural gener-

alizability of the American models of counseling for clients from other cultures. They provoke readers to consider these fundamental questions: Who could act as the counselor and what professional training is required? Are the therapeutic approaches and techniques developed in the United States applicable to non-Western cultures? What types of problems require the attention of professional counselors? Do the recipients of these counseling services conceptualize and explain their problems in the same ways as the counseling psychologist? Do they share the same goals as their providers?

Cross-cultural exposure often leads to new perspectives when reflecting on one's own culture. Cross-cultural perspectives on counseling will sharpen our focus on counseling models themselves. Deconstructing counseling in a cultural context will expand the generic framework of counseling theories to achieve a better understanding of the nature of psychological problems and the interpersonal dynamics involved in the problems as well as the solutions. It will demand closer scrutiny on the suitability of the assessment tools and therapeutic techniques adopted for different clients. These cultural considerations will also enhance the development of counseling as a specialty in each society—not only in cultures outside the United States, but within American psychology itself.

Through this International Forum, the editor and series coeditors of this journal have challenged all counseling psychologists to deconstruct counseling in a cultural context. Continuing efforts in this direction will stimulate more cultural exchanges and adapt counseling, as a profession, to a global context.

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