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Repositioning cross-cultural counseling in a multicultural society

● Miu Chung Yan and Ching Man Lam

The role of culture in counseling practice¹ has been widely recognized. However, the existing cross-cultural counseling practice of putting the emphases on modifying the traditional counseling approach to fit culturally different clients is questionable. This article addresses the shortcomings of this modification-based cross-cultural counseling approach and argues that for a counseling approach to be genuinely sensitive to cross-cultural issues, it must first recognize its untenable foundations. These include: first, an inherent cultural bias of adopting a Western-based perspective; second, a static and oversimplified interpretation of acculturation; third, a tendency to ignore the transient context in which cross-cultural counseling is being practiced; and last, a problem of assuming that the counseling practitioners hold a value-free position. With our background as Chinese counselors and our experience in counseling in a multicultural society, we use the experience of Chinese immigrants to critically assess the current cross-cultural counseling practice and to illustrate some of our arguments.

Cross-cultural counseling: a modification-based approach

Contemporary counseling models are embedded within 20th-century Western² culture. Generally, Western culture favors the

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ideas of individualism, egalitarianism, independence and self-actualization. As a product of these cultural traits, counseling is inevitably framed by a paradigm that emphasizes self-determination, non-judgemental attitudes and individuality. This paradigm serves as the standard for counselors and social workers for measuring their interventions and also as a base on which counseling activities have developed (Compton and Galaway, 1994).

It was not until the 1970s that social scientists started to query this culturally biased paradigm of counseling. Since the 1970s scholars (Dien, 1982; Kagan, 1971; Roll, 1980; Snarey, 1985) have examined the traditional etic cross-cultural perspective of human behaviors. They share a common view that there are few universal patterns of behavior and developmental tasks differ from culture to culture. While culture has become an indispensable category in academic fields, social scientists have begun to challenge the inherent inadequacy and cultural bias within the existing counseling practices and have therefore started to discuss a new perspective in cross-cultural studies.

Counseling, as one of the applied tools of social science, has also been expanded out of the traditional Western context into non-Western areas (Pedersen et al., 1989). Practitioners found that their counseling skills were ineffective when applied to culturally different clients (Draguns, 1989). There is a consumer demand for more culturally appropriate services as well as an ethical calling in the helping professions to strive for more cultural awareness in cross-cultural counseling practice.

The key assumption of the dominant discourse of the cross-cultural counseling process is that there is no fixed mode of counseling. In other words, no single assumption, specific set of skills, unique process or typical working relationship fits people from different cultural backgrounds. Yet approaches in cross-cultural counseling that have been developed since the 1960s contradict this. Draguns (1996) summarizes the common elements in cross-cultural counseling. They include: modifications of traditional counseling techniques; complications in using the counseling process; associations of counseling concepts to culturally related self-presentation and communication; variations in reported complaints and symptoms; and translations of cultural experiences into the counselors' idioms of distress.

In sum, cross-cultural counseling advocates a high level of flexibility in actual practice. Effective cross-cultural counseling is

assessed according to the cultural fit between the practitioners' counseling skills and the background of their clients. Modification of existing models to fit into a cross-cultural paradigm and technological adjustments to traditional counseling practice underpin the dominant discourse of cross-cultural counseling.

An untenable foundation for a modification-based counseling approach

Although this modification-based approach helps counseling practitioners to assess the cultural appropriateness of their practice, because of the cultural context in which counseling is developed this approach misses the fundamental issue, that makes any modification of existing counseling models untenable.

The existing dominant counseling models are embedded within the framework of Western psychology. This predominant Western formulation is built largely upon the Western patriarchal culture, with an unexamined assumption that the existing white, middle-class paradigm is the norm and is the standard of measurement and treatment. Consequently, Western cultural codes prescribe all dominant counseling theories and models (such as psychoanalytic, person-centered or behavioral approach), popularize certain characteristics (such as freedom of the individuals, human rationality) and advocate certain dominant themes (such as independence, self-actualization, self-determination).

This dominant Western construction, furthermore, defines normative expectations about human behaviors and the counseling discourse. It is thus fair to say that if counseling cross-culturally is merely a notion of modification, then apparently it tends to preserve the domination of European-American ideals. Such ideals have always been taken for granted as the criteria of normality and therefore perpetuate a view that all ethno-cultural minorities living in a multicultural society are culturally disadvantaged, deficient or deprived (Katz, 1985; Mays, 1985; Sue, 1981).

However, human nature has no independent existence and the primordial and universal fact of human nature is its dependence upon culture (Lichtman, 1990). Our culture determines our world view. Our world view in turn gives meaning to our perception and determines the meaning of our situation. Therefore, many of the current cross-cultural counseling models are not only inadequate to describe, explain, predict and deal with the richness and complexity

of a culturally diverse population, but also lack a conceptual framework to incorporate culture as a core concept in the counseling process.

Here we would like to employ the Chinese in North America as an example to illustrate the cultural deficiencies of the traditional Western-based counseling theories. It is commonly recognized that Chinese and Western cultures originated from different philosophical, ideological and social traditions (Bond, 1986, 1992; Bond and Hwang, 1986; Hsu, 1972; King and Bond, 1985; Liang, 1974; Triandis, 1983). They have developed marked differences in the very definition of a man,³ of human development,⁴ of family,⁵ as well as of human relationships.⁶

The divergent cultural values between the Chinese and the West illustrates the fact that the existing dominant Western discourse, which is immensely preoccupied with the ideology of individualism, is not applicable to the collectivistic Chinese cultural system (Lam, 1997; Yan, 1998). Without consideration of the differences of various cultures, the modified-base cross-cultural counseling model is deficient and any intervention skills based on these acultural and deficient models are inevitably inadequate.

In order to re-conceptualize the cross-cultural counseling discourse, one should first dismiss the notion of modification and employ a conceptual framework which incorporates culture as a core concept for challenging the underlying ideological premises. We need a cross-cultural counseling model that is not based upon the traditional models, but originates from where our clients position themselves culturally. It is our clients' culturally bound perception that gives meaning to our counseling practice, not vice versa.

Deficiencies of acculturation theories

Cross-cultural counseling is tied closely to acculturation theories. In working with Asian Americans, Kitano and Maki (1996) summarize the influence of diversified acculturation processes and develop a model along the line of cultural pluralism to illustrate how to counsel Asian Americans (see Figure 1). This model is based on the assumption that assimilation and ethnic identity are correlated. There are four possible grids where a person can be situated in this model. Type A is a group of people who are highly assimilated to the host culture and retain low ethnic identity. Type B is the bicultural group. Type D, which comprises a group of people who

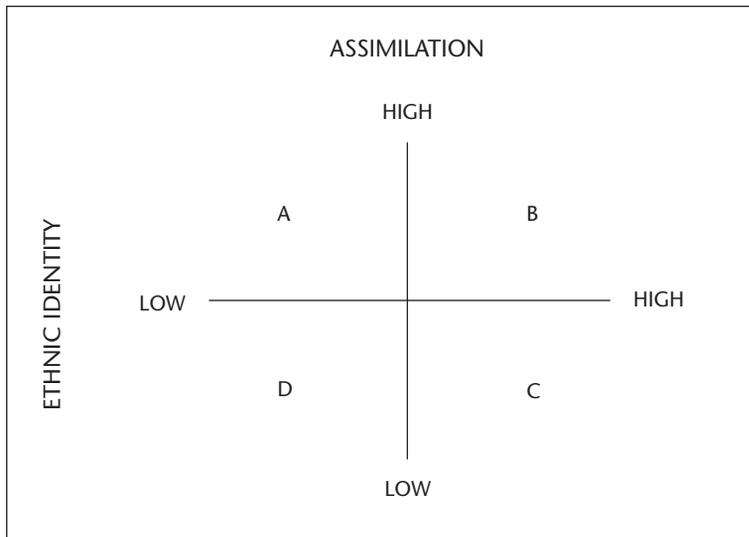


Figure 1 Assimilation and ethnic identity

Source: Kitano and Maki (1996: 141).

are facing cultural problems and language difficulties, is the opposite of Type A. Type C is a group of people who have a low level of assimilation and a low ethnic identity and they are mostly alcoholics or delinquents.

In order to test and modify our counseling approach, Kitano and Maki (1996) proposed that we need to place our clients on a two-dimensional taxonomy. This implies that the more our clients retain their own ethnic identity, the more we need to modify our counseling approach.

Problems of using acculturation models in cross-cultural counseling, particularly in counseling American Indians, have been addressed by various authors (see Choney et al., 1995 for examples). Kitano and Maki's model (1996) also exposes at least two possible deficiencies. First, it fails to explain how people choose their cultural identity. Recently a consensus has been growing about cultural pluralism, stressing the recognition of a multicultural society and an individual's ability to construct his/her own combination of cultural patterns (Lum, 1995). There is more than one possibility for people in a multicultural society to be what and where they want to be culturally. In other words, people from different cultures can choose to be totally assimilated by the host

culture, to preserve their absolute loyalty to their own culture, or to adopt both host and ancestral cultures.

Second, the acculturation model assumes that people behave in accordance with their stage of assimilation. Based on this assumption, Kitano and Maki's acculturation model divides people's behavior and their acculturation into four categories. Among them, people in Type B, a bicultural state, are perceived as people with an ideal mix of cultural identities that offers the most effective response to the contextual demands (Gomez, 1990; LaFromboise et al., 1993). Biculturalism is defined as an integration of the competencies and sensitivities associated with two cultures within a single person (Ramirez, 1983) and bicultural clients are those 'who [have] knowledge and insights drawn from a variety of experiences' (Kitano and Maki, 1996: 141). But people in Types D and C will be expected to react poorly to the contextual demands.

In reality, cultural identity and behaviors are not necessarily related. For instance, studies of Chinese immigrants indicate that although immigrant families are willing to accept changes in peripheral elements or more pragmatic aspects of life, they strongly resist changing core or central elements of their culture (Bond and Yang, 1982; Triandis et al., 1986; Wakil et al., 1981). It is also found that Chinese immigrants have transformed few of their fundamental value systems to those of the host society (Yao, 1979). It implies that people will learn what the host culture expects them to from their daily life. They then behave appropriately according to the so-called culturally appropriate manner, but choose to maintain their own cultural identity.

The case of Chinese immigrants illustrates that sometimes biculturalism is only a functional reaction to the environment or a coping behavior. It is a way for individuals to maintain a functional equilibrium between two cultures. In other words, the bicultural response is a product of an accumulative learning of how to muddle through the actual contextual demands of living in another culture. Minority people appraise what the host culture expects from their behavior and therefore react differently in different settings, for different purposes, with different people, in 'so-called' culturally appropriate manners. Kitano and Maki's model (1996) classifies people into a two-dimensional taxonomy, that is, behavior and assimilation status. It ignores the complicated psychological process of those torn between the choices of being assimilated and being loyal to their ancestral culture.

In addition, people's pre-migration experience, their migration

process and their post-migration adjustment are all factors that complicate the actual experience of our clients living in a multi-cultural context (Herberg, 1993). The acculturation process is no longer valid if it ignores the time factor and the multicultural context in which the process takes place. A historical dimension is important for an effective model of cross-cultural counseling.

Therefore, in cross-cultural counseling practice, practitioners should first distinguish whether their clients' behaviors are cultural reactions or contextual reactions. We should be aware of the reality that our clients' willingness to engage in the counseling process may merely be a result of a functional reaction to the contextual demand. Often, they are functionally and strategically fitting themselves into external demands that may not necessarily be consistent with their cultural identity. As a cross-cultural counseling practitioner, one should understand the cultural identity of clients and behaviors in a context instead of simply basing it upon the accultural assessment.

Transient residency: a phenomenon ignored

Conventionally, cross-cultural counseling is being connoted as a counseling alternative for cultural minorities who permanently reside in a host country. It assumes a stable residency as well as an assimilation process in the context of application. With improved transport, travel is no longer impossible or time-consuming. Nowadays, in culturally diverse countries, such as Canada, the United States, Australia and many others, there are people who are either sojourners or residents whose link to their home country is strong and pervasive. This group of people is more transient in their residency.

Take the Chinese community in Toronto as an example; there are several emerging groups of transient residents other than the most typical one, visa students whose identification with the host society is always temporary and short. Firstly, there are 'astronaut' families where one spouse leaves the family in a foreign country while he/she returns to the home country to continue with his/her business. Secondly, there are 'satellite' kids whose parents stay in their home country while the kids are studying in the country where the family has decided to migrate. Thirdly, there are 'transit' families where they set up a temporary home in the country to

which they have emigrated in order to fulfill residency requirements, but maintain their permanent homes in their home countries.

It is observed that the hope of returning to the country of origin may impede the family's efforts to adapt to the new situation (McGoldrick et al., 1982). Without a doubt the migration patterns and assimilation process of these groups of people differ from the traditional immigrants. With the transient nature of these groups of immigrants, many of them may choose not to adopt new cultural norms but rather choose to retain their own ethno-cultural heritage. In the meantime, they may encounter a unique problem of being a split family or they may encounter a unique form of 'identity crisis', which is a dilemma of choices between being and not being acculturated. Unfortunately, this new group of transient residents is seldom a subject of the cross-cultural counseling discourse. Not many studies have been done so far on this group of minorities, other than the international students. However, one thing which is predictable and important for cross-cultural counseling is that the adherence of these transient groups to their own culture demands cross-cultural counselors to be more alert to the fallacy of their reducing cross-cultural counseling to a modification of the traditional counseling approaches.

Counselors

Cross-cultural counseling discourse ignores the fact that counselors themselves are products of their own culture. First of all, there is always a presumption that cross-cultural counseling is an intervention process that involves a counselor from the dominant culture counseling a person from the minority culture. However, in a multicultural society, cross-cultural counseling is no longer confined to this traditional role model. It is a complicated process with a dynamic interplay between the cultural identities of both the counselor and the counselee. It is not uncommon for counselors who are not from the host culture to provide counseling services to clients who come from different ethno-cultural backgrounds, both native to and not native to the host culture. By recognizing the counselors' own cultural background, the whole cross-cultural counseling discourse may be different. Figure 2 illustrates this complicated relationship.

There are four possible categories of cultural relationships between counselors and counsees. Cross-cultural counseling will

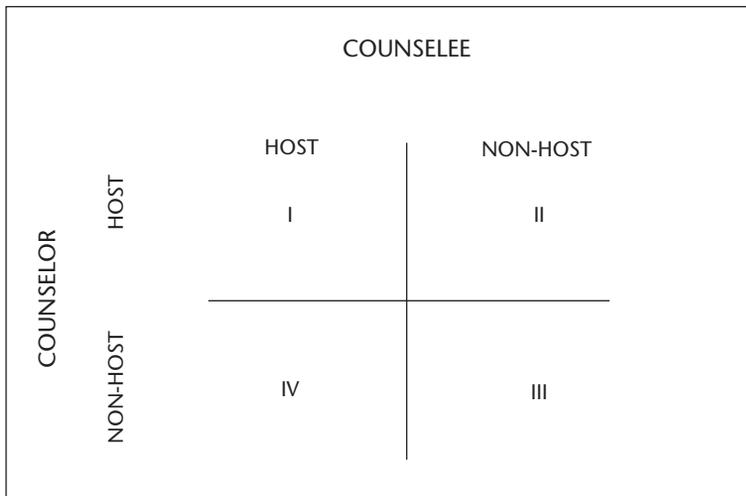


Figure 2 The cultural interplay of counselor and counselee

take place in situations II–IV. Situation II is the most frequently discussed scenario, whereas situations III and IV are often ignored. In situation IV, a non-host counselor needs to attune her/himself to the host culture. This is technically easier, as counseling practice is constructed upon a Western culture model and most counseling practitioners have been trained to acculturate to the values of Western culture in which counseling theories are embedded (Sue and Sue, 1990).

In both situations II and III, an effective counseling service may involve a complicated cultural adjustment process. The counselors, regardless of their cultural background, have to understand the unique culture of their clients and its impact on the perception of their problems. Then, they need to assess the applicability of the counseling models, which are formulated upon the base of the Western culture. An effective counseling process demands a culturally sensitive match of a reinterpretation of the conventional counseling approaches and the needs of the culturally different client.

Meanwhile, counselors themselves should also be aware of their own cultural background and its impact on their perception of the whole counseling process. Sue and Sue (1990) have reminded us that counseling training itself is a culturally biased acculturation process. There are some inherent biases of the practitioners in

cross-cultural counseling, which include personal orientation of counselors, their amount of contact with culturally different clients, their expectation of the clients and their inter-cultural communication skills (Leong and Chou, 1996). However, the most fundamental bias of practitioners, an inevitable one, comes from their own unconscious cultural domination over their counsees in the cross-cultural counseling process.

Traditionally, counselors are mistakenly seen as professionally neutral (Yan, 1998). They assume a neutral and non-intrusive role and ignore the fact that counseling is an inter-subjective process that creates meanings for the problem-solving activities being carried on between the counselor and the counselee. Therefore, counselors themselves are never neutral and non-intrusive. They always take part in their clients' story creation process that ultimately determines the final resolution.

As human beings, counselors are also cultural artifacts. Culture, according to Geertz, is 'a central ingredient in the production of [the] human animal itself' (Geertz, 1973: 47). It consists of 'the standard for deciding what is, what can be, how one feels about it, what to do about it and how to go about it' (Goodenough, 1957: 522). Counselors, as human beings, think, feel and act according to the culture they have learned. As cross-cultural counselors, they need to unveil their own cultural selves which shape their understandings to their clients' problems and their intervention decisions (Leong and Chou, 1996). Therefore, cross-cultural counselors need to expand their 'cultural sensitivities' from a focus on their clients' cultural background to their own cultural identities. In order to counsel cross-culturally, the fundamental requirement for practitioners is to get in touch with culture, be aware of their own cultural background, acknowledge the cultural differences between themselves and their clients and be open to the possible cultural influences from their own culture on their clients. Without this cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural counseling may be another fallacy of our professional neutrality.

Conclusion

As Peavy mentions, 'at this point in the profession of counseling there is not a great deal of agreement about how to think and practice counseling in contexts of cultural diversity' (1997: 109). The prevalent cross-cultural counseling approach, based on a modification of conventional models, is only one of the possible

alternatives. With the emergence of the emphasis on the notion that the creation of meanings is culturally specific, the discourse of cross-cultural counseling may need to be switched from a modification premise to a cultural contextualization. This article has attempted to re-examine the nature and limits of the prevalent cross-counseling discourse. It proposes that a more effective and accurate cross-cultural counseling approach is a mutually cultural adjustment process. It demands that the counseling practitioners nurture a high-level sensitivity to both the cultures of their clients and of themselves and a critical assessment of the existing theories and tools being used in most cross-cultural counseling discourse. These may be the keys to an effective cross-cultural counseling process, which itself is a purposefully inter-subjective interaction between two culturally different human beings.

Notes

1. The domination of therapeutism in capitalist society reduces the practice of counseling to therapeutic exercise. To define counseling and therapy is far beyond the scope of this article. For those who are interested in the distinction between them, please refer to Peavy (1997: 15–22). In this article we adopt a broad definition of counseling as one of the basic helping tools that can be used in any setting from career counseling to clinical therapy.
2. The word Western here refers to Anglo-American culture. It is a simplified connotation only for the convenience of discussion.
3. King and Bond (1985) state that man is seen as a psychological being in Western culture and as a social being in Chinese culture.
4. Plath (1982) states that Eastern cultures define development as growth in the human capacity for empathy and connection, whereas Western culture defines it as growth in the human capacity for differentiation.
5. 'Integrative vs. differentiation' is the contrast between Chinese and Western families in Chin (1979).
6. 'Father-son dyad' is the dominant relationship attribute of Chinese culture, compared with the 'husband-wife dyad' in Western culture in Hsu (1971).

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