

ISSUES AND STRATEGIES IN LEADING AN EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL COUNSELING: A PROCESSING MODEL FOR BEGINNING CULTURALLY DIVERSE COUNSELING GROUP LEADERS

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ABSTRACT: Counseling outcomes in culturally diverse groups are dependent, in part, on the match between the group's leader and the client's respective stages of racial consciousness. For example, the counselor and client may have opposing views on race, or the counselor's state of racial consciousness may be either more or less knowledgeable than that of the client. Each mix will lead to a different counseling outcomes. This article discusses issues and strategies in leading to an effective cross-cultural counseling and presents a processing model for beginning a culturally diverse counseling group leaders.

BACKGROUND

Cross-cultural counseling and psychotherapy have a brief history in the Asia-Pacific region and fairly new in Malaysia. According to Sue and Sue (1990), cross-cultural awareness of diverse groups mental health needs has increased significantly in the past decade throughout the United States. Hanna, Bemak and Chung (1999) noted that this growing "psychological wave" is sweeping throughout the Asia-Pacific countries in the early 1990's.

Cultural diversity has asserted itself as critically important in counseling groups. Human thoughts, feelings, and attitudes regarding race differences is the basic form of prejudice and are believed to act as the foundation of human behavioral responses in inter-group interaction. By its nature, race prejudice is an extremely emotional issue. It may impede attainment of the goals both to the individual to counseling (Corey & Corey, 1997). Consequently, the group's leader and his or her members must deal with culture and ethnicity issues.

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Equally important is the counselor's understanding of the uniqueness and of the depth of cultural influence on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of group members. Acknowledging that no individual can be an expert on all cultural groups, the delivery of a successful counseling service depends on the counselor's heightened awareness and sensitivity towards racial, ethnic, and cultural issues (Atkinson, 1985; Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989; Pedersen, 1985).

EFFECTS OF DIVERSITY ON COUNSELING GROUP OUTCOMES

Counselor educators and practitioners have recognized the importance of preparing culturally effective counselors since the early 1970's in the United States (Katz, 1985; Wren, 1985). Culturally sensitive practice plays a critical role in the delivery of group counseling services. Wyatt and Parham (1985) noted available data suggests that cultural sensitivity, or lack thereof, influences virtually every aspect of the therapeutic relationship. They believed virtually no area of the helping process is left unaffected, including diagnosis and assessment, therapist expectations and preferences, therapeutic process and outcomes, effects of race and therapeutic approach on clients' perception of counselor's credibility, level of self-disclosure, usage rates, and premature termination of therapy.

Some experts viewed culturally diverse counseling groups as being potentially disruptive to the general goals of counseling, whereas others saw the composition of such groups as only a minor problem that can be dealt with effectively as a part of the counseling process (Pedersen, 1985; Wyatt & Parham, 1985).

Beginning with the assumption that the therapeutic encounter is essentially a social influence attempt, the intercultural experts argued that ethnic similarity between the counselor and the client represents the optimal pairing arrangement because source credibility, attractiveness, and influence are a function of similarity between the source and the receiver. Conversely, cross-culturalists believed that the counselor's training and sensitivity can transcend ethnic differences. In cases of socioeconomic or religious counselor-client dissimilarity, even if unsuccessful outcomes are achieved, attitudinal similarity is seen as a more powerful determinant of attraction between source and receiver over group membership similarity.

Counseling outcomes in culturally diverse groups are dependent, in part, on the match between the group's leader and the client's respective stages of racial consciousness. For example, the counselor and client may have opposing attitudes about race, or the counselor's state of racial consciousness may be either more or less advanced than that of the client. Each mix will lead to different counseling outcomes.

Helms (1985) characterized the "autonomous" counselor as one who is comfortable with his or her racial identity and is able to empathize with the client's anger (even when directed toward

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the counselor's own race). Ideally, the autonomous counselor is able to promote the development of each group member's racial consciousness.

FORMING CULTURALLY DIVERSE GROUPS

Group members bring with them their values, beliefs, and prejudices, which can quickly become apparent. Even those members who show little overt racism will have some unconscious racist attitudes, exhibited by statements such as "Many of my friends tell me..." The development of these unconscious attitudes is due, in part, to the pervasiveness of racism in our society. Therefore, it is unwise to minimize the psychological damage that racism can create in the group setting.

One goal of multicultural group counseling is to provide new levels of communication among members. This goal can prove helpful in overcoming stereotyped attitudes by providing accurate information about one's racial, ethnic, or cultural group.

A second goal is to establish sensitivity, understanding, and trust with members of other cultural groups. Some researchers suggested that attitudes can be changed, but the effects may not be long lasting. Mio (1989) found those students exposed to ongoing, direct interactions (of a non-therapeutic nature) with persons of another ethnic group demonstrated greater knowledge and understanding of that group as compared with students who only engaged in library research on a particular group.

POTENTIAL ISSUES IN CULTURALLY DIVERSE COUNSELING GROUPS

Some problems likely to arise in the culturally diverse counseling group include, but are not limited to, extreme emotionality, lack of communication, and group non-direction. Majority race members may react to their group experiences cognitively (e.g., denial, intellectualizing problems) while minority group members tend to react with more affect (e.g., anger, fear). These differences result in two dissimilar patterns of communication being established in the group, and these potentially dysfunctional communication patterns will probably impede both individual and group progress. Much of the research in this area has been conducted on White therapist-Black client interactions in individual therapy (Berg & Wright-Buckley, 1988; Turner & Armstrong, 1981).

Group members are also likely to differ in their perception of themselves in terms of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. Helms (1985) proposed a model of racial identity development that described a stage-like process of developing racial consciousness. The final stage in this model is the acceptance of race as a positive aspect of self and others. Because different members

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within a group will be at different stages of development, the potential for conflict is greatly increased.

Self-disclosure is a prerequisite to the creation of meaningful relationships in a group (Yalom, 1975). Although trust is an essential ingredient for promoting self-disclosure, it may be difficult to establish in culturally diverse groups. Black men, for example, are very reluctant to disclose feelings because of a lack of trust in Whites and because they are extremely alienated in the American society (Ridley, 1984; Vontress, 1988). Differences among members in their sense of "belonging" to the group, and to the society in general will affect the group's processes and progress, because some members will isolate themselves (Talbot, Robyn, & Ninggal, 1999).

Group counseling researchers (Corey, 1985; Gazda, 1978; Rogers, 1970; Yalom, 1975) explained that groups, regardless of their focus or the theoretical orientation of the leader, tend to progress through observably predictable stages. Group members are selected and placed into a group based on similar characteristics (e.g., age, presenting problem, assumed receptivity to a particular treatment approach).

Finally, educational preparation and clinical experiences related to cultural diversity may not be available to group counselors working with multicultural and diverse population. Most graduate programs give inadequate emphasizes on diversity issues. Contrary, requiring that such training be included in counselor education programs may not always produce the desired results. Sue and Sue (1990) noted that incorporation of ethnic minority content has been viewed with ambivalence because of a general lack of understanding of how to integrate this content (and) knowledge pertaining to ethnicity and culture as presented from a narrow view of personality theory.

A PROCESSING MODEL FOR BEGINNING CULTURALLY DIVERSE COUNSELING GROUP LEADERS

Group work is widely used as an approach to counseling. Corey and Corey (1997) recognized the importance of groups and stated that groups are the treatment of choice, not a second rate approach to helping people change. In groups, members often participate in a variety of activities and experiences with the goal of gaining greater understanding of their personal issues.

Experiential learning activities often are used to teach complex principles through the use of organized experiences and frequently are used in the group counseling process (Dutton & Stumpf, 1991; Thatcher, 1990). Because of their critical role in group counseling, much attention has been focused on teaching these activities to beginning group leaders. Basic skills required to process both structured and unstructured group experiences have been neglected even though many books of group exercises are available (Kees & Jacobs, 1990).

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In group counseling, processing refers to helping group members identify and examine what happened in the group and their individual experiences of the event, as well as how the event occurred and how different members responded to it. Processing activities and events in group help group members better understand their experiences in the group and relate these to their personal lives. Researchers (Brady, 1984; Brown, 1980; Sue & Sue, 1990) have emphasized the importance of this processing component for increasing individual learning and group productivity.

The components of processing group activities can be depicted in a model that offers a “road map” for processing group activities with diverse group members. The PARS model (Processing: Activity, Relationships, Self), adapted from Glass and Benshoff Model (1999) is composed of three stages of processing, each with a possible focus on one of three specific areas. Processing includes three stages, i.e. reflecting, understanding, and applying. The three specific focus areas are activity, relationships and self.

The PARS model provides the structure for thinking about the intervening with groups to more effectively facilitate the learning process for members. Johnson, Johnson, Stane, and Garibaldi (1990) found evidence that group processing increased members’ individual achievement and group productivity. However, the PARS Model assumes that group leaders have a prerequisite understanding of group dynamics in order to use the model to develop interventions for the group.

	Activity	Relationships	Self
Reflecting	Reflecting-Activity	Reflecting-Relationship	Reflecting-Self
Understanding	Understanding-Activity	Understanding-Relationship	Understanding-Self
Applying	Applying-Activity	Applying-Relationships	Applying-Self

FIGURE 1: THE PARS MODEL BY GLASS AND BENSHOFF (1999), THE JOURNAL FOR SPECIALISTS IN GROUP WORK, 24, P. 18.

PARS PROCESSING QUESTIONS

Reflecting – Activity

1. What did we do during this activity?
2. What was the hardest part of this challenge?
3. What was the easiest part of this challenge?

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Reflecting – Relationships

1. How did we act toward each other during this experience?
2. What kinds of things did we say to each other while we were doing the activity?
3. How did we as a group work through the challenge?
4. What did we do during the activity to help each other?
5. Who emerged as a leader during the exercise?

Reflecting – Self

1. How did you as an individual participate in this challenge?
2. Were you a help or a hindrance to the success of our group during the exercise?
3. What role did you assume in the group during this challenge?
4. What did you do during this activity that you are most proud of?
5. What did you do during this activity that you are most disappointed in?

Understanding – Activity

1. Thinking about how we performed on the last challenge, what does this say about our group?
2. What did we learn about our group on the previous activity that we did not know before?
3. After observing how we performed on the last challenge, what do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of our groups?
4. What is the purpose of our participating in this activity?
5. How will this challenge benefit our group members?

Understanding – Relationships

1. Considering what we said earlier about our group, what does this say about our ability to work with others in the group?
2. How well does our group work together?
3. How efficient are we as a group at solving problems?
4. How well does our group work together at accomplishing a common goal?
5. Is our group able to put aside differences to succeed?
6. How well is our group able to listen to one another and share ideas?
7. How will working together benefit our group?

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Understanding – Self

1. Considering what you said earlier about your participation in the group activity, what have you learned about yourself that you perhaps did not know before?
2. Viewing how you performed during this challenge, what does this say about your investment in the group?
3. Do you feel that you acted in a manner that demonstrates how important the success of this is to you?
4. How does participation in these activities benefit you as an individual?

Applying – Activity

1. What have we learned from participating in this particular challenge that will benefit us in our daily lives?
2. What skills did we use during this activity that we may use back in the “real world?”

Applying – Relationships

1. What did our group do well in dealing with each other that could benefit the individual members of our group back in school/work/home?
2. What skills did we use with each other that will help us with other people back in our daily environment?
3. What have we learned about working with others that will help us in other situations?

Applying – Self

1. What have we learned about ourselves that may affect how we handle other situations in the future?
2. What will you do differently as individuals back in your daily routines that will be a result of what you have learned here?

CONCLUSION

Counselors who are group leaders need to understand potential problems that can arise in culturally diverse groups. Sue and Zane (1987) argued that counselor’s credibility can be greatly enhanced when the therapist intentionally uses knowledge of clients’ cultural background

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to determine clients experience of the world, including their view of the problem, problem solving, and expectations of the treatment process.

Recommendations given by many culturally diverse experts to group counselors interested in building their cross-cultural awareness and competence include:

- (a) consultation or group co-leadership with minority counselors already serving specific cultural groups;
- (b) participation in cultural immersion experiences (e.g., significant holidays and events);
- (c) actively taking inventory of the needs and issues of minority groups in their communities; and
- (d) language training when possible, or at least becoming familiar with the correct of ethnic names, values, and tradition.

A great deal has been written detailing the knowledge necessary to be effective in a cross-cultural setting (Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimble, 1996; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki & Alexander, 1995; Sue & Sue, 1990). However, studies on Asia-Pacific cross-cultural groups are usually limited in scope and did not universally represent their world-views and concerns. Gong-Guy (1985), Pedersen (1990), and Selvadurai (1991) in discussing cross-cultural issues suggested that the Asia-Pacific population should be viewed in their own cultural context since they have different types of sub-cultural adjustment issues.

Judging by the increased volume of literature on racial and cross-cultural issues in counseling in the United States, it seems that group counselors and educators especially in the Asia Pacific region need to take the challenge of promoting diversity. Sue and Sue (1990) added that research on Asia-Pacific groups should be expanded and carefully interpreted because they provide meaningful insights and understandings to the body of knowledge of cross-cultural counseling in the profession. This shift may be significant especially when diversity is no longer a trend that comes and goes, but is something real.

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