



Elements of Culturally Competent Counseling

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Cross-cultural counseling has become a major force in the profession significantly impacting theory and practice. As the 21st century continues to progress, it is increasingly evident that counselors must become ever more competent with respect to issues of multiculturalism and diversity. This is underscored by ever-changing population demographics that are resulting in an increasingly diverse society. It is important to note that the diversity seen in contemporary society is reflected not only along racial/ethnic dimensions, but is evident in other aspects of culture such as socioeconomic status, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, and ability status.

Given this reality, what are the elements of culture in counseling? What is the nature of culturally competent counseling in the 21st century? This digest is an attempt to summarize some significant concepts that are important to consider when counseling across cultures.

Understanding the Social and Historical Context

What is evident from the outset is that any counselor who claims to be culturally competent must ground his or her practice with a solid understanding of history and the social movements which shape it. In the United States this means understanding the history of multicultural counseling as a discipline within the historical and social context of the country immediately following World War II and continuing through the last half of the 20th century. This can be characterized as a period of great change in American society that was spurred by a fundamental questioning of the nature of social exclusion for many groups of people. Groups that had been historically marginalized and oppressed began to demand, as never before, social, economic and political inclusion within the mainstream of American life. These demands manifested themselves in large-scale social and political movements that ultimately forced significant changes to the country's way of life. Therefore, if counselors are to work with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, they must familiarize themselves with key historical events and social movements that have influenced attitudes, values and behaviors of groups of people.

Understanding the Dynamics of the Cross-Cultural Zone

A primary emphasis of culturally competent counseling is to examine the nature of the helping relationship when there are significant cultural differences between helper and helpee. These differences have been conceptualized as the *cross-cultural zone* (Lee & Diaz, 2009). A counselor enters this space whenever he or she differs significantly from a client in terms of cultural background. This zone of helping, with its dynamic encounter of helper/helpee cultures can be

envisioned with respect to how counselors conceptualize client or student issues, how they promote culturally competent consultative relationships, and how supervising counselors can influence the development of cultural competency among supervisees.

What is extremely important to emphasize is the idea that helpers who practice in a culturally competent fashion within the *cross-cultural zone* must adopt a broader perspective on culture. In a culturally pluralistic society they must understand that culture is more than just race and/or ethnicity. Given that elements of culture are present in all aspects of counseling, in their work with clients/students or supervisees, counselors need to see the multiple dimensions of cultural identity presented by those they endeavor to help. Counseling interventions must be predicated on the realization that clients simultaneously experience the world on a number of cultural dimensions that include not only race/ethnicity but gender, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, socioeconomic status, and ability status as well (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000).

As our society continues to diversify, many clients or students seeking to develop a cultural identity based on these multiple dimensions are often faced with difficulties in this process. For instance, many immigrants to the United States often confront acculturation challenges. Foremost among these is maintaining a connection to their culture of origin while adjusting to their new cultural environment in the United States. The attempt to achieve this balance is an important developmental process for many immigrants and may need to be considered when helping within the *cross-cultural zone* (Shin & Muñoz, 2009).

Counselors also need to be aware of how issues of social class may affect the lives of clients or students. For example, the debilitating effects of classism, a subject often taken for granted in the counseling literature, may affect how some clients perceive the counseling process, particularly if that process is perceived by clients as representing the societal values expressed in middle and upper-middle class socioeconomic cultural realities (Bienvenue & Ramsey, 2006).

A counselor who is sensitive to a client's or student's experience of any form of oppression or discrimination must realize that culturally competent counseling is a vehicle for client empowerment. Cross-cultural counseling as a process for empowerment can help clients combat the negative effects of marginalization resulting from any number of "isms". Empowerment is about helping clients refute the internalization of an inferiority worldview associated with their perceived subordinate status in societal relationships with powerful others (Harley, Stebnicki, & Rollins, 2000).

Another aspect of empowerment often overlooked in culturally competent counseling is the promotion of the psycho-spiritual realm of personality. Spirituality and/or religion are critical components to the well-being and holistic health of many people. In many cultural contexts, it is important to remember that there is little distinction between religious/spiritual and secular life. Culturally competent counselors, therefore, must be open to exploring and including spiritual/religious dimensions within the counseling process (Maglio, 2009).

In a culturally diverse society, counselors must also understand that there is a multitude of helping sources available to individuals. For many people long-standing indigenous models of helping often have more credibility than professional counseling. When appropriate, a culturally competent counselor will seek to form consultative relationships with helping sources valued by the client. By acknowledging the psycho-spiritual realm evident in other models of helping, the counselor demonstrates respect to the client as a multidimensional cultural being (Lee & Armstrong, 1995).

Ethical Cross-Cultural Counseling Practice

Underlying all of the elements in the cross cultural zone is the concept of ethical practice. The most recent Code of Ethics from the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2005) features a major emphasis on cultural diversity. In order to be culturally competent counselors, individuals must be open-minded and recognize that valuing and respecting cultural differences requires a commitment to life-long learning and being able to make sound ethical decisions within diverse cultural contexts.

Cross-Cultural Counseling Research: The Foundation of “Best Practice”

Culturally competent counseling practice should evolve from a solid foundation of empirical evidence. In developing a multicultural counseling research agenda, consideration should be given to the following: developing research questions where “culture” is operationally defined as more than just race/ethnicity; exploring intra-group differences as well as inter-group differences; using caution in examining majority/minority comparisons in research; exploring questions of multiculturalism and diversity in counseling with qualitative as well as quantitative methodology; and ensuring that implications of cross cultural counseling research for improving counseling practice are clearly articulated (Sheu & Sedlacek 2009).

Cross-Cultural Counseling Competency: The Journey of a Lifetime

The development of cultural competency is a life-long personal and professional journey. This developmental

process will be enhanced if counselors understand the unique and ever changing dynamics of the concepts which underlie culture and commit themselves to understanding their clients as complex, multidimensional, cultural beings. It is hoped that the elements of culture presented here will serve as important professional markers on this challenging and exciting journey.

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Suggested APA style reference:

Lee, C. C. (2008). *Elements of culturally competent counseling* (ACAPCD-24). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.