Celebrating Diversity Through the Art of Counseling

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Introduction

If you were asked to describe the United States in one word, “diverse” might be the most accurate word you could choose. We live in a country full of diversity—in geography, climate, industry, and, most certainly, people. The United States’ populous is composed of people of different ages, creeds, cultures, disabilities, ethnicities, genders, physical builds, races and sexual orientations. This diversity is our strength, but at times, especially when human rights are violated, it can be our weakness (Coy, 1994).

What is diversity?

Diversity is defined by Webster (1986) “as the state or fact of being diverse; difference; unlikeness; variety; multiformity; or a different kind, form, character, etc; unlike; of various kinds or forms; multiform.

Why celebrate diversity?

The trend of celebrating diversity is being triggered by a paradigm shift in human resources. Driven by the feminist paradigm shift and the minority movement, slowly but steadily, we are learning that variety is our greatest strength.

We live in a multifaceted society. The full participation of all sectors of our diverse society is increasingly vital to the survival and growth of society. The implications for how our society will strive to meet the challenges brought on by the nation’s diversity are enormous. The ACA and its counselors must address these challenges through action not rhetoric (Coy, 1994).

A Melting Pot:

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. in his article, “Stop Pulling American Apart,” states that “from the beginning or our history, America was seen as a severing of roots and an interweaving of separate ethnic strands into a new national design, a melting pot. Ideas of assimilation and integration were regarded as noble objectives. All cultures have been amalgamations of good and evil, and the fact remains that the great liberating ideas — democracy, self-governance, individual rights, religious tolerance and the abolition of slavery—are all uniquely European in origin. Today those ideals empower people in all cultures and continents.”

According to Bolton-Brownless (1987), the melting pot image has given way to a more pluralistic ideal in which immigrants maintain their cultural identity while learning to function in the society. President Clinton, in his inaugural address (1993), said that the very idea of America is “ennobled by the faith that our nation can summon from its myriad diversity the deepest measure of unity.” Diversity will reshape the face of America. It will be up to all of our nation’s citizens to help chisel a flattering image.

The American character is resilient and thrives on change. However, past periods of rapid evolution have brought deeper, more fearful aspects of the national soul. Today, America is a microcosm, a little world in miniature viewed as an epitome of the universe (Coy, 1994).

Diversity vs Division:

As members of society, we must fulfill our responsibility by showing that all individuals, regardless of their diversity, have an equal right to attain whatever success their character and talent allow.

Herein lies the dilemma: How do we best embrace and celebrate our diversity without focusing too narrowly on our differences and thereby creating division? We need to acknowledge the problems diversity can create, but we need to highlight the promise of our differences. “E pluribus unum” is still a good thing: Out of many, one (Coy, 1994).

Two Ways of Thinking:

Many Americans care deeply about human rights and diversity, but only when we share our experiences, ideas and perspectives with each other will we develop effective solutions. We must encourage two ways of thinking: consideration of an issue from a variety of perspectives and an examination of the assumptions and attitudes that underlie long-held views of prejudice.

Prejudice and discrimination have played key roles in our history as a nation, clashing with our founding principles of equality and justice. The wars against Native American tribes, the enslavement of Africans, the internment of Japanese-Americans, and discrimination against the disabled, homosexuals, senior citizens, females, and people of various religious beliefs, were all based on the belief that some people are inferior (Coy, 1994).

Civil Rights Movement:

In the second half of this century, we began to see some progress in human rights relations. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s gave many Americans hope that justice and greater equality were possible. Attitudes and situations that were once the norm—racist statements by political officials, separate and inferior public institutions for Blacks, the refusal to serve diverse groups in restaurants or to accommodate them in hotels—began to change as the result of heroic individuals and collective struggles.

In 1995, progress on human rights issues seems to have stalled just when so many other social problems loom larger than ever. Our society faces tough issues. Our ability to address these problems is complicated by isolation and prejudice, which often parallel the economic divisions in our society.

Many people are beginning to realize that we must come to terms with human rights and, that until we do so, we will be unable to create the moral and political will necessary for making progress on any of the other pressing social issues that we face (Coy, 1994).

Solutions:

Increasingly, leaders are calling on Americans to hold a thoughtful dialogue on human rights violations. Dialogue alone is not the answer, but it is an essential first step. Having open, respectful dialogue provides an opportunity to explore the assumptions and values that underlie long-held beliefs among people of difference backgrounds. The only way for us to get along better is to talk openly and respectfully with each other about our different backgrounds. This kind of discussion gives people the opportunity to learn about diverse experiences and backgrounds and leads to a greater understanding and appreciation of others’ perception about human rights issues (Coy, 1994).
You may want to begin this dialogue by asking yourself the following questions or by discussing them with others:

1. What human rights violations have you experienced? Has it affected you or people you know? How would your life be different if you didn’t have to deal with it?

2. In what ways do your attitudes toward persons of other groups differ from those of your parents?

3. As you think about your own attitudes, do any of them run counter to the ideals that you hold? If so, how do you deal with that internal conflict?

4. You probably have heard expressions of prejudice from family and friends. How do you think they learned their prejudice?

5. How often do you have contact with people of other groups? What is that like?

6. Do you have friends of other diverse groups? If so, how did you get to know them?

7. What efforts are currently underway in your community to deal with human rights violations?

8. What next steps can we take to make a difference in our association or community?

Who’s right?

James Carville (1994), in *All’s Fair: Love, War and Running for President*, discusses segregation in the Louisiana town of Carville. He wrote, “In Carville, it got hot in the summer and not very cold in the winter; you did things together as a family, you played and you rode horses. Whites and Blacks may have done the same things, but we did them separately. The town was segregated.”

“I sometimes would wish that if the Blacks just didn’t push so hard, we could go back to talking about other things,” he continued. “Then I read *To Kill a Mockingbird.* I put it inside another book and read it under my desk during school. I attacked that book with a vengeance and when I got to the last page, I closed it and said, ‘They’re right and we’re wrong.’”

Other books have lead others to similar revelations. In the book, *And the Band Played On*, Randy Shilts (1987) describes the history of the AIDS epidemic and the unnecessary loss of life experienced by the gay community. It was only when the epidemic attacked the heterosexual community that the public became concerned.

Summary

Transforming human rights violations in this country will require the participation of many Americans in face-to-face, constructive discussions. We must educate ourselves and the public and change attitudes on the continuing problems of discrimination and prejudice toward all members of the human race regardless of their age, creed, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, physical build, race, or sexual orientation.

Helmut Kohl on the 50th anniversary of Auschwitz stated that, “We must respect the rights and dignity of all people. We have a universal obligation to protect the life, dignity, rights, and freedom of every individual human being. One of our priority tasks is to pass on this knowledge to future generations so that the horrible experiences of the past will never be repeated. The past must remain alive in that it demands the sense of reality so sorely lacking throughout history. The inhumane treatment of Jews and homosexuals cannot be obliterated - those who would repress or deny them cannot be reached through memorial ceremonies, or anniversaries.”

If we accept the crimes that are happening on our door steps, what remains of the counseling profession, the American Counseling Association, the United States and the world?

References


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