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Cross-Cultural Counseling: An Oakland Model

By Nolan Jones, WISR M.A. MFT student

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Nolan Jones WISR MFCC Paper

CROSS-CUL TURAL COMPETENCE: AN OAKLAND MODEL

Buffy, a middle class college senior, had just been asked to mentor a low-income student :from the Oakland inner-city. Buffy enthusiastically accepts the invitation. With plans to attend medical school in the fall, she thought she would volunteer some time in the interim.

However, a few weeks later, she called the mentor coordinator to ask for some advice because she was afraid to meet with her student mentee. When asked why? She replied, "I am not sure I will be able to relate to her culturally. She is Muslim and I am not. Do I have to act a certain way with her? I don't want to offend her." What is the ethnicity of the mentor and the mentee?

Both the mentor and the mentee are African American.

Susan, a high school junior, rushes into her counselor's office upset. She says no matter how hard she tries, her English teacher refuses to give her a grade better than a D' in the class. Susan turns in all of her homework, does all of her assignments, and still nothing seems to change. According to Susan, the teacher says the problem is in her writing. Susan told the counselor that one of her friends said the reason her grade is not improving in English is because she writes like she speaks. The counselor asked Susan what her :friend meant. Susan said, "I write in Ebonies." What are the ethnicities of Susan, the teacher, and the counselor?

Susan is Chinese, the teacher is white and the counselor is African American.

Becky and Jan are best friends at a local high school. Becky is from a low income family and Jan is :from a middle class family. One day they are assigned to work

with a counselor on a newsletter. After several days of working with the counselor on the committee they approached the assistant director and said they refuse to continue working with the counselor. They said that they could not relate to the counselor. Moreover, they said they felt uncomfortable around him especially when he would make statements like "we should work together because we have got to stick together and because we have a lot in common." What is the ethnicity of the two best friends, the counselor, and the assistant director?

The counselor is Latino, Becky is Mexican American, and Jan is Puerto Rican. Jan does not speak Spanish. The assistant director is African American.

All of the examples above actually happened during my experience as a counselor and mentor coordinator in Oakland. The three vignettes demonstrate three points. First, automatically ascribing particular behavioral traits to certain ethnic groups in Oakland can be unpredictable and misleading in an assessment. Second, because two people belong to the same ethnic group does not mean they have an immediate cultural connection. Finally, White middle class Americans are not the only ones that can benefit from cross-cultural education. Some African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and American Indians who make vertical socioeconomic moves to the middle class and upper middle class, often embrace some of the cultural predilections of the American White middle class. Thus, in order to be an effective cross-cultural counselor in Oakland, the recommended approaches given in cross-cultural education must be customized for the population being served. Customization, implementation, practice

and conscious self-awareness contribute to the development of true cross-cultural competence. Hence, in this paper I will look at how cross-cultural competence can occur in Oakland, California using some of the cross-cultural theories and models.

In our cross-cultural discussion, I will make reference to one or more of five major groups in Oakland: African American, Asian American, American Indian, European American, and Hispanics. Because of the nature of the study, ethnic and cultural descriptions must be clarified. The names or terms used to describe each group are the names most preferred by the groups themselves according to the May 1995 U.S. Census. Thus, the term White will be used to describe European Americans, Hispanic to describe Spanish speaking indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere, and American Indian to describe non-Spanish speaking indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere. However, when applicable, more specific ethnic definitions such as Latino, Chicano, and Mexican American will be used in relevant vignettes. I will use the term People of Color instead of minority when referring to African American, Asian American, American Indian, and Hispanic American collectively.

THE NEED FOR CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION

Whether in teaching, counseling or mentoring, cross-cultural implies interacting or interfacing across cultural lines. It means providing a service to someone from another cultural background. Should there be a different approach when working with someone :from another culture? Can a counselor, teacher, or mentor be effective with someone

culturally different :from him/her? Or perhaps, a more pertinent question is what will it take for effective cross-cultural counseling to occur given the typical presumption woven into the fabric of most American institutional disciplines appears as the following: all 3cultures different from mainstream middle class white American culture are somehow deviant, deficient, or dysfunctional. These chauvinistic attitudes are probably what gave birth to such terms like "culturally disadvantaged." However, given the rapid demographic change in American society, chauvinistic references to multicultural diversity will be challenged even more. For example, "by the year 2010, because of higher birth rates and immigration trends, nonwhites are expected to constitute more than one third of the American people, and upwards of 50 percent of the school age population. By the year 2050, the average U.S. resident will trace his or her descent to Africa, Asia, the Hispanic world, the Pacific Islands, the Middle East" (Taylor, 1990). Furthermore, Spanish is the second most spoken language in American (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). Thus, the need for cross cultural dialogue and competency is relevant and timely.

CULTURE CLARIFICATION

Cross-cultural education is important in any human service field. Cross cultural education extends beyond learning about other ethnic groups in the United States. There are many forms of culture that exist. For example, there are male cultures and female cultures, southern cultures and eastern cultures, urban cultures and rural cultures, adolescent cultures and adult cultures, popular cultures and mainstream cultures. When

two people come together as a married couple, each brings his or her family culture to the relationship. Thus, techniques from cross-cultural education can certainly be applied to many forms of relationships. However, the cultures I will discuss are of the five major ethnic groups in Oakland, California that have tenets such as language, family practices, worldviews, and values specific to their groups. The same techniques used to provide cross-cultural counseling for People of Color from other cultural backgrounds may be used in other cross-cultural arenas mentioned earlier. However, when counseling People of Color, one should consider four areas: the stage of racial identity formation of his/her client, the economic class of the client, the political and social history of the client's ethnic group, and his/her own identity, history, biases, judgments, and class as a counselor. All can affect the counseling relationship.

COUNSELING USING RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT MODELS

One approach to use in cross-cultural counseling is the racial identity development model.

Racial identity development models argue that the identity development stage of a client can determine what method of therapy to use, to whom the client will relate, and to what the client will respond. Racial identity theories contend that People of Color move through several stages of racial identity in their lives. The stages range from a stage of rejection of one's own culture while embracing middle class white American culture to a stage of nationalistic glorification of one's own culture while

totally rejecting middle class White America. In each of the racial identity development models, the stage in which the person feels most at peace is the stage of internalization, self-acceptance of one's own culture without rejecting middle class white American culture.

In the study of African American racial identity development, William Cross describes four stages of development that All African Americans go through. Those stages are called pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization. The encounter stage is the time in which African Americans "consciously or unconsciously devalue their own Blackness and concurrently value White values and ways. There is a strong desire to assimilate and acculturate into White society" (Sue & Sue, 1990). Two things occur, during the next stage, the encounter stage. First, the individual encounters racism, which causes a personal crisis, which challenges his/her previous cultural values, then the Black person changes his/her worldview to a Black worldview. In the immersion-emergion stage, the Black person immerses himself/herself into Black culture and withdraws from dominant white culture. The final stage, internalization, a sense of security in self is achieved as a result of resolving the conflict between the old and new identities. Like Cross' racial identity development model, Jackson (1975) also proposes a four stage racial identity development process for African Americans. His four stages described as passive-acceptance, active-resistance, redirection, and internalization correspond to Cross' pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization stages respectively.

African Americans are not the only People of Color who experience the racial identity development stages, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians have a similar "sociopolitical identity transformation" (Sue & Sue, 1990). Sue describes this process as the Racial/Cultural Identity Development R/CID model. In this model there are five stages: Conformity, Dissonance, Resistance and Immersion, Introspection, and Integrative Awareness. While the R/CID is similar to Cross' and Jackson's models, there are some nuances to consider. For example, in each of the development stages, the R/CID model describes the person of color's attitude toward self, toward others in the same group, toward People of Color in other groups, and toward the dominant group. A person of color in the conformity stage of R/<CID model has a depreciating attitude toward self and his/her group, a discriminatory attitude toward other People of Color in other groups, and an appreciative attitude toward the dominant group. A person of color in the Integrative Awareness stage of the R/CID model has an appreciative attitude toward self, group, and other People of Color in other groups. However, there is a selective appreciation for the dominant group (Sue & Sue, 1990).

A competent cross-cultural counselor understands the importance of the R/CID model in counseling situations. According to Sue, a person of color at the conformity stage might prefer a White counselor as opposed to one of his/her ethnic group due to the rejection of his/her culture. The White counselor's responsibility, in this case, is to determine whether or not he is making progress with his client or if his client is complying in order to please or gain the approval of the White counselor. (Sue & Sue,

1990). On the other hand, a person of color in the Resistance and Immersion stage would prefer a counselor of his/her ethnic group. A White counselor might symbolize the psychological racism and oppression the person of color sees as the cause of the problem. If the client in the Resistance and Immersion stage has a White counselor, s/he will be the object of blame and attack. Therefore, the counselor must not personalize the attack. In each situation, if the counselor, using the R/CID model, assesses the stage of identity development of his client first, then s/he can determine the best approach for building the necessary rapport with the client. For example, what if the client identifies himself/ herself as Biracial and the source of her problem is determining how to identify with both of the ethnic groups she is a product of? What stage of racial identity development would categorize this client? What if a Black client of West Indian descent displayed hatred toward Black people in the United States? Is it a clear case of R/CID or is it cultural tenet of the West Indies? The assessment would depend on the stage of identity of the counselor.

In addition to understanding the R/CID of the client, the counselor must also be aware of his /her own R/CID, for it can have a profound effect on the relationship and the recommended therapy.

For example, a mutual disrespect could evolve between a counselor of color in the conformity stage who only values middle class white American values, and a client in the resistance stage of R/CID, who rejects middle class white American culture. Will the counselor lose his/her credibility in the eyes of the client due

to the different orientation? Or, would the counselor patronize or judge the client for rejecting his/her different orientation?

Maybe, neither situation would happen.

However, given the different stages of R/CID both the client and counselor represent, it is highly possible that building rapport would be challenging, particularly if the counselor is self-righteous about his/her perspective and unaware of his/her R/CID and that of his/her client. In case of the Latino counselor interacting with the Mexican American student, perhaps the lack of rapport established between the two reflected the different places in the R/CID model of each person. The counselor seemed to encourage cultural pride and sticking together while the student only thought of interacting first a human being.

EDUCATING THE BOURGEOISIE

Much cross-cultural education is done for the purpose of educating white middle class professionals who have had no or limited experience in dealing with People of Color from low income or impoverished backgrounds. However, the small percentage of People of Color in the counseling field, in some cases, also have limited or no experience working with other People of Color. While there have been some impressive work done in the field, several assumptions are made as a result of the research. First, it is assumed that only white middle class professionals are the only ones who need or could benefit from cross-cultural training and preparation for dealing with families and communities they know little about. Middle class African Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians and Hispanics who embrace many of the beliefs and attitudes of white middle

class can also benefit from cross-cultural education.

Second, it is assumed that cultural challenges only exist between people from different ethnic backgrounds. Class differences between people within the same ethnic group often present cultural challenges, too. For instance, every client of color may not be low income, and therefore have had a different experience or challenge particular to that class. The case of the Pre-Medicine student who could not relate to the Muslim mentee exemplifies this. Even though both of the students, one in college, and the other in high school, were African American, religion was only one level of cultural difference. The other was class. The college student was from a middle class family and had never experienced life as a low-income high school student from the inner-city. Class difference was just as much a cultural barrier between the two students as religion.

Finally, it is assumed that those who have received cross-cultural counseling education would be able to maneuver competently in cross-cultural client counselor relationships. Knowledge must accompany practice. Information about different cultural groups does not guarantee cross-cultural competence. There are nuances gained from actual experience and practice that theory and information cannot possibly cover. For example, in Oakland there are middle schools and high schools with predominantly Asian American student populations who have embraced inner-city African American "Hip Hop" culture and lifestyles. How would someone with a background in cross-cultural counseling and a belief about how to work with Asian American students customize

his/her information in this new environment with "non-traditional" Asian American students? A competent cross-cultural counselor would take his or her cues from the environment and adjust his or her information accordingly.

GATHERING THE ETHNIC HISTORIES OF YOUR CLIENTS

Gathering information on the ethnic, social and cultural histories of your clients of color is another step necessary toward acquiring cross-cultural competence. Every Black person that walks into an office is not an African American from the Bay Area. Some are from the West Indies, South America, and many parts of Africa. Some are from the south and others are from back east, cultural differences by region. Likewise, every Hispanic is not Mexican or Mexican American. Some are Latino, Cuban, Puerto Rican, EI Salvadorian, etc. Is your Asian client first, second, or third generation Asian American?

Or, is s/he a recent immigrant from China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos? If you are unsure of the ethnic and cultural history of your client or clients community, then one approach is to ask. Asking for information up front is one of the best ways to avoid making whopping stereotypic assumptions about groups of people you may be unfamiliar with.

Secondly, gathering historical information may also point to cues and directions to take in the therapy. For example, are the issues to address in a therapy session related

to trauma and depression many recent Asian immigrants experience due to separation

from family and loves during the immigration or are they related to adjusting to a new non-traditional environment that may not support personal cultural practices? Is your African American client really stressed about her family? Or, is she suffering from Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress (MEES): "an environment in which racism and subtle oppression are ubiquitous, constant, continuing, and mundane, and one in which African Americans must daily suffer the annoying 'micro-aggressions' such environments breed (Carole, 1998). Why is your Mexican client stressed out? Is it due to employment challenges or is it due to the frustration with having to communicate with his child's teacher in another language (McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano, 1982)? In addition to learning about your client by researching the history of client's culture, gathering information :&om the clients themselves will help answer many of the questions, and help

avoid stereotyping. It also empowers the client with an opportunity to identify

him/herself.

Gathering information demonstrates to your client that you care enough to learn about him/her and that you have done your homework. Besides, it is a great way to develop rapport with your client. All counselors regardless of their ethnic backgrounds should gather information about their clients. Assuming you know about a person based on his or her ethnic background could cause you to misdiagnose or assess the client. The case of the Chinese student in Oakland being penalized in her writing for using Ebonies is an example of how one could misjudge someone based on ethnicity. Most people

would have assumed the "Ebonies" conflict involved an African American student. Investigating, reading, taking classes, and asking questions demonstrate genuine and responsible actions. Will the information gathered about your client's culture really apply to your client? Is that really the culture of your client? If the reading, research seems irrelevant in nature. Then ask the appropriate questions of your clients? For example, some research may imply that many inner-city African Americans are poor and uneducated, but your client is obviously a middle class college graduate originally from the inner-city ghetto. How do you proceed? One approach is to abandon assumptions and ask questions for clarification. Where are you trom? How do you define yourself ethnically? What is your socioeconomic status? Are you first generation or second to go to college? What were the reasons for migrating? How many are in the family? Who is considered part of the family? However, depending on your client, particularly with many American Indian clients, a more indirect approach to asking questions may be more effective. In any case, if you are working with a client whose culture you know little about, before asking questions, explain that you might make some mistakes and that you are coming from a particular worldview but are willing to learn (Sue & Sue, 1990). The client in return will appreciate your honesty and may be willing to work with you.

KNOW THYSELF: CULTURAL SELF-ASSESSMENTS

Just as important as gathering information about the client is gathering information about oneself as a counselor. As a counselor, what are your worldview, R/CID, and prejudices? Are you aware of them or are you unconscious of them? To be

an effective and competent cross-cultural counselor, the counselor must become aware of his or her own issues around race, prejudices, biases and values. Then actively learn how to manage the beliefs and values that could be potentially damaging to a client from another culture. For example, if you are a white counselor who have had some traumatic experiences with African American men, and your client happens to be an African American man, to what degree will those subjective feelings affect your ability to counsel your African American client? Will it shape the questions? Will it taint the compassion? Or, will it trigger residual emotional baggage easily projected outwardly? Likewise, if you are an upwardly mobile, educated African American counselor counseling a low income African American from the "ghetto" with a victim mentality, how would that affect your ability to counsel your client? As a counselor, managing your issues will enhance your personal effectiveness in cross-cultural interactions. (Attending diversity training, values exercises, ethnic studies courses, and conscious interaction with diverse cultures in different arenas are great ways to become aware of your own prejudices.)

AVOIDING CROSS-CULTURAL TRAPS

Even with the best intentions or the desire to be fair, non-judgmental, and culturally appropriate, we sometimes "fall short." We fall for the cross-cultural traps inherent in the process of developing cross-cultural competence. Two of those cross cultural traps are stereotyping, and denying one's personal expertise.

A novice relying heavily on the recommendations from books in the field of cross-cultural counseling may periodically fall into trap of stereotyping or

overgeneralizations. For example, a counselor in Oakland had read that Asian American families valued hard work and education.

He had also noticed from his personal

experiences growing up in the Bay Area, that many of the Asian Americans he had encountered had been successful academically. Furthermore, he recently learned that one of the most prestigious public universities in the country, DC Berkeley, student population comprised mostly of Asian students. Thus, this Oakland counselor after assessing the academic needs of the high school students concluded that Asian American students had no problems and really did not need an academic or college advising. When one of his Asian students at the high school requested help because he was failing his class, struggling in tutoring, and demonstrated a fear of applying to college, the counselor responded with disbelief.

He suggested that the student just study harder because

according to his research, Asians were strong in this arena and thus would not need as much help.

What the Oakland counselor failed to realize is although there are many Asian Americans succeeding academically, there are many Asians in America like the recent Southeast Asian immigrants who are not succeeding academically. According to the 1995 U.S. Bureau of Census, among the Hmong, only 31 % have completed high school, and less than 6% of Tongans, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmongs 25 years and older have a bachelor's degree. While the counselor's advise was informed by his personal

experience and research, his overgeneralization caused him to fall into the trap of stereotyping a student that could have benefited ITom a more compassionate and understanding approach to counseling.

Perhaps, the Oakland counselor could have

avoided the cross-cultural trap of stereotyping by first, approaching the student as an individual in need of guidance. Then, the counselor could have offered counseling service based on the student's academic needs and not based on the belief about the group the student represented. Overgeneralization makes it easy to ignore the abundant ethnic and cultural diversity within groups like Asian Americans. Asking questions in advance for clarification is a great way to avoid such traps.

The other cross-cultural trap to be aware of is the process of denying one's

personal expertise. In the attempt to "do it right" be politically correct, or culturally appropriate, counselors and teachers often throw common sense out of the window. Techniques and practices used to get results are often shunned due to the fear of offending someone's culture. For example, an Oakland counselor refused to discipline an African American female student for breaking one of the program rules: No girls in boys rooms and vice versa. The female student took a shower and several male students' rooms. The counselor's reasoning for not taking action was that he did not want to offend the student and also did not want to be accused of racism or sexual harassment. Thus, he remained silent about the whole incident. The student was not held accountable for breaking the rules until the incident was reported to the assistant director. Although the

counselor was aware of the nature of the teen's infraction, his fear of being accused of being racist or sexist prevented him from taking the actions he had been trained to take. The counselor's behavior in this vignette is similar to one of common barriers to effective cross-cultural counseling with African Americans: unquestioning acceptance of behavior or perspectives of African Americans due to one's own personal guilt (Sue & Sue. 1999). "The African American client is allowed to freely express hostility or take any action that is felt to be justified. This stance may involve feelings of racial guilt on the part ofthe counselor, who is attempting to prove he/she is open and accepting" (Sue, p. 249, 1999). Unquestioning the African American perspective does a grave disservice to African Americans who want to be held accountable for their actions. It is a paternalistic and patronizing stance. In this example, the student was infuriated with counselor for not reprimanding her when he first learned of the infraction. Ironically, the counselor created a self- fulfilling prophecy. He still offended the student. Like the Oakland counselor, it is possible for many professionals working with multicultural populations to compromise their integrity, loosen their boundaries, and endure verbal attacks from African Americans due to their own internalized guilt and fear. No one has the right to achieve a personal goal without considering the rights and feelings of others regardless of the ethnic and cultural group.

One way the counselor could have avoided this particular cultural trap is by following the agency's policies. The rules applied to all students regardless of the ethnic

culture. Girls were not allowed in the boy's room and vice versa. The rule is straight forward, not racist or sexist. Another way to avoid denying your own expertise, or in this case, common sense, is by managing your own issues around race and sex. An effective cross-cultural counselor gives him/herself permission to make mistakes as s/he discovers his/her issues around racial and ethnic cultural differences. Although the Oakland counselor's intentions were positive, his unresolved feelings with African Americans clouded his decision-making ability.

CONCLUSION

I realize that my multicultural experiences are unique. Furthermore, I have had the luxury of growing up in Oakland, California, one of the most diverse places on the planet. My dentist is Asian American, my peridontist is African American, and my doctor is White. My mechanic is Nigerian, and as a child my family had regular barbecues with my brother's best friend and his family who is Mexican. One of my best friends is from Guyana and the other is from Kenya. At my local bank there are five tellers. Each represents one of five different ethnic groups: African American, Asian American, Mexican American, East Indian, and White. The pharmacy at Kaiser Oakland has similar demographics. In my neighborhood, my next door neighbors on the right are Mexican American and my next door neighbors on the left are recent Asian immigrants. Three doors down my neighbors are white. As a child, my next door neighbors were a black and white interracial couple. My favorite teacher in elementary school was an Aftican

American woman and my favorite teacher in junior high school was a White woman. Perhaps my experience has shaped my perspective on cross-cultural counseling. Not everyone has had exposure to the rich diversity I have. Certainly there are people who have never left all white suburbs, or all black neighborhoods, chinatowns, barrios, etc. Clearly, some people have only seen people from other ethnic groups on television or in magazines. So how do you sensitize or desensitize those who suffer ftom xenophobia because they have not been exposed to other cultures? Will diversity training and cross cultural education work? How do you minimize the damage from those who remain myopic in their views of other cultures but are in positions to provide a human service to them? Should they be allowed to provide service without appropriate cross-cultural training? Does it matter?

The ultimate goal in cross-cultural education is to develop cross-cultural competence. Ideally, we would like all therapists, counselors, educators, and mentors working with ethnically and culturally diverse populations to be effective and affirming with all of their clients. Therefore, from my experience and research I propose the following recommendations for enhancing cross-cultural counseling.

1. Know thyself, thy beliefs, thy values, and thy prejudices.
2. Develop a healthy curiosity for other cultures and languages.
3. Be human, not perfect. Give yourself permission to make mistakes.
4. Learn your client's culture and history. But treat the client as an individual first.
5. Be open and flexible. Make what you know about cultures specific to the client.
6. Be compassionate and listen for cultural cues.
7. Customize your research

Most of the recommendations have already been addressed. I will elaborate on the others

in future papers.

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