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## The Making of a Culturally Competent Counselor

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## The Making of a Culturally Competent Counselor

### Abstract

Culturally competent counselors are accurately aware of culturally learned assumptions by themselves and their clients, comprehend the culturally relevant facts and information about a client' culture and are able to intervene skillfully to bring about positive change through counseling. A three-stage developmental framework proceeds from awareness to knowledge to skill in defining necessary competencies through a needs assessment. Examples of cultural bias are discussed and resistance to multicultural competence by counselors is described. Examples of facts and information needed to comprehend each cultural context meaningfully are identified and the possibility of multiculturalism as a "fourth force" in counseling is examined. Skills for finding common ground are illustrated through an Interpersonal Cultural Grid and a Triad Training Model is described for learning to hear the positive and negative unspoken messages of culturally different clients.

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## Introduction

Since all behaviors are learned and displayed in a particular cultural context, the culturally competent counselor must address the client's cultural context. This chapter will provide guidelines on how the client's cultural context can be addressed, how counselors can increase their cultural competence, the perils, pitfalls and difficulties that counselors can expect to encounter and the rewards that come to the culturally competent counselor. The best sources for reading about the research on multicultural competence in counseling are Sue, D. W. et al. (1998), Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, and Alexander (2001) and Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner & Trimble (2002).

Defining multicultural competencies is important for several reasons. First, these competencies have been accepted and adopted by the American Counseling Association and by Division 17 (Counseling) of The American Psychological Association. Second, practicing counselors are legally vulnerable when they violate defined and accepted competencies. Third, established practices of counseling which violate these competencies need to be modified or discontinued. Fourth, these competencies put the emphasis on "best practice" rather than the special interests of any group. Fifth, multicultural competencies will help prepare the resources of counseling to fit with the needs of other cultures around the world. No matter how skilled, trained or intelligent one is as a counselor, if counselors are making wrong or culturally inappropriate assumptions they will not be accurate in assessment, meaningful in understanding nor appropriate in their interventions.

The visual image I have of culture is to imagine a thousand people sitting in your lap whom you have collected in your lifetime from family, friends, acquaintances, enemies, and fantasies and they take turns talking with one another and with yourself. Culturally competent counselors will be aware of the cultural complexity of their own cultural identities and will be able to "hear the voices" of their culturally different clients as well. I make several assumptions about culture in this chapter. First, culture is broadly and inclusively defined to include ethnographic, demographic, status and affiliation. Second, all counseling takes place in a multicultural context. Third, culture includes both the more obvious objective and the more hidden subjective perspectives of our identity. Fourth, both cultural similarities and cultural differences are equally important. Fifth, the most important insights of multicultural awareness can be learned but often cannot be directly taught.

The framework of multicultural competence is described in a three-level developmental sequence (Sue et al, 1998). Competence begins with "awareness" of your own culture in relationship with the other cultures around you, and an awareness of the culturally learned assumptions which control your life, with or without your permission. Accuracy depends on making right assumptions. Once you have achieved awareness, the next level is to gather the facts, knowledge and information required for comprehending the meanings behind your own and your client's behavior. Comprehension depends on having the right facts and information about the cultural context. Once you have achieved awareness and comprehension, the third level is to develop appropriate skills for bringing about change in the right direction. Competent skill depends on an accurate assessment

of the situation and meaningful understanding to bring about positive change in each cultural context.

Counselor training programs which overemphasize awareness objectives make students painfully aware of their own inadequacies or the inequities around them. Students can become frustrated because they do not know what to do with their new awareness in the absence of knowledge and skill. Some programs overemphasize the importance of facts, knowledge and information through lectures and readings. Without awareness, the students cannot see the relevance or importance of that information and how it can be used. Still other programs overemphasize skill objectives without regard for the foundations of awareness and knowledge. Participants in such programs will never know if they are making things better or worse. Multicultural competence is developed through a three-stage developmental sequence that begins with awareness of culturally learned assumptions and moves through comprehension of culture toward the practice of active skills.

### **An Assessment of Awareness Needs**

The first step of developing multicultural competence is an assessment of cultural awareness needs. Each person's level of awareness is determined by their ability to judge a situation accurately both from their own viewpoint and the viewpoints of members in other cultures. Becoming aware of culturally learned assumptions as they are both similar and different from members of other cultures is the essential foundation of counseling competence. Gilbert Wrenn described counselors as "culturally encapsulated" when they define reality according to one set of cultural assumptions, become insensitive to cultural variations, disregard evidence disproving their assumptions, depend on technique-oriented or quick-fix solutions to problems and judge others from their own self-reference criteria. Pedersen (2000a) describes ten specific examples of cultural encapsulation by Western-trained counselors:

1. All persons are measured according to the same hypothetical "normal" standard of behavior, irrespective of their culturally different contexts,
2. Individualism is presumed to be more appropriate than a collectivist perspective in all settings.
3. Professional boundaries are narrowly defined and interdisciplinary cooperation is discouraged.
4. Psychological health is described in a "low context" perspective even when the client comes from a "high context" culture.
5. Dependency is always considered to be an undesirable or even a neurotic condition.
6. A person's support system is not normally considered relevant to any analysis of that person's psychological health.
7. Only linear, "cause-effect" thinking is accepted as scientific and appropriate.
8. The individual is usually or always expected to "adjust" to fit the system.

9. The historical roots of a person's background are disregarded or minimized.
10. The counselors presume themselves to be free of racism and cultural bias.

In doing a needs assessment of multicultural competency it is necessary to understand that the counselor must be or become well trained in the theories, skills and strategies of conventional, "textbook counseling". Multicultural counseling competence is not a "short-cut." Increasing multicultural competence should not become a rationalization for disregarding the theories and practice of counseling as described in most counseling textbooks. At the same time it is important to recognize that these same textbooks reflect the cultural context of their authors and may require "translation" to other cultural contexts for culturally different clients.

The first step of developing multicultural competence in counseling is an assessment of that individual's needs in the areas of awareness, knowledge and skill (Pedersen, 2000a). Accurate awareness is the ability to describe a situation accurately from both the counselor's own viewpoint and the viewpoints of people from other cultures. Counselors can judge their degree of accurate awareness by evaluating their abilities in the following characteristics: (1) ability to interpret both direct and indirect communication styles; (2) sensitivity to nonverbal cues; (3) ability to recognize cultural and linguistic differences; (4) sensitivity to the myths and stereotypes of other cultures; (5) concern for the welfare of persons from other cultures; (6) ability to articulate elements of the individual's own culture; (7) appreciation for multicultural education; (8) ability to recognize relationships between and among cultural groups; (9) ability to accurately distinguish "good" from "bad" in other cultural contexts; (10) becoming aware of your own stress-limits when working with members of other cultures.

Assessment of an individual's knowledge is the second stage of a needs assessment. If awareness helps persons to ask the right questions then meaningful knowledge helps them get the right answers to those questions. Knowledge leads to understanding the complex alternatives and ambiguity in each cultural context. Learning the language of another culture is a good example of how new knowledge facilitates counseling. Knowledge about culture presumes the following specific competencies: (1) knowledge about the histories of cultures other than your own; (2) understanding the role of education, money, values, attitudes and behaviors in other cultures; (3) knowing the language and slang of another culture; (4) knowledge about the resources available for teaching and learning in other cultures; (5) understanding how each individual's own culture is perceived by members of other cultures; (6) developing a professional expertise relevant to persons in other cultures; (7) possession of information that persons in other cultures will perceive as useful; (8) knowing about social services and how they are delivered in other cultures; (9) knowing about culture shock and acculturative stress; (10) knowing how members of other cultures interpret their own rules, customs and laws.

Assessment of an individual's skill is the third aspect of this needs assessment. If awareness and knowledge are lacking the counselor will have a difficult time becoming skillful. If awareness is lacking the counselor will make wrong assumptions. If knowledge is lacking then gaining a meaningful understanding will be difficult. Some indicators of a

counselor's multicultural skill will include the following competencies: (1) the ability to use the teaching and learning techniques of other cultures; (2) the relevance of an individual's natural teaching and learning style in other cultures; (3) the ability to establish empathic rapport with persons from other cultures; (4) the ability to analyze feedback accurately within the context of other cultures; (5) the ability to develop new ideas in the context of other cultures; (6) gaining access to appropriate service agencies and resources; (7) coping with stress in new cultural contexts; (8) anticipating consequences of events in other cultures; (9) functioning comfortably in the new culture; (10) finding common ground with members of other cultures without losing integrity.

Counselors can benefit from this awareness-needs assessment in several ways first, reviewing the influence of their own multicultural identities will help the counselor already living in another culture understand their own constantly changing viewpoint. Second they will be better able to anticipate the right questions to ask as they adapt their lifestyle to multicultural alternatives. Increased multicultural awareness will provide more freedom of intentional choice as the counselors become more aware of their own multiculturalism.

### **The Development of Multicultural Knowledge Resources**

Before we were born, cultural patterns of thought and action were already being prepared to guide our lives, influence our decisions and help us take control of our life. We inherited these cultural patterns from our parents and teachers, who taught us the "rules of the game." As we became more aware of other people and cultures we discovered that "our" culture was only one of many possible ways of thinking and acting from which we can choose. By that time most of us had already come to believe that our culture was the best of all possible worlds. Even when we recognized the advantage of other ways we were not always able to replace our cultural habits with these alternatives.

One culture-centered perspective that has developed from the awareness-knowledge-skill framework is a list of propositions about "multicultural theory" or "MCT" (Sue, Ivey & Pedersen, 1996). These six propositions about theory demonstrate the fundamental importance of a culture-centered perspective for appropriate comprehension in the multicultural context. These propositions are: (1) Each Western or non-Western theory represents a different worldview. (2) The complex totality of interrelationships in the client-counselor experience and the dynamic changing context must be the focus of counseling, however inconvenient these may become. (3) A counselor's or a client's racial/cultural identity will influence how he or she defines problems and how he or she dictates or defines appropriate counseling goals or process. (4) The ultimate goal of a culture-centered approach is to expand the repertoire of "helping responses" available to counselors. (5) Conventional roles of counseling are only some of the many alternative "helping roles" available from a variety of cultural contexts. (6) MCT emphasizes the importance of expanding personal, family, group and organizational consciousness in a contextual orientation. We need to comprehend the specific circumstances and context where a particular psychological theory or methodology works best. We need to know the cultural boundaries that limit our generalization of counseling theory to other cultures. We

need to know which psychological phenomena occur universally and which ones only appear in specific circumstances.

Multiculturalism has emerged as a "Fourth Force" or fourth dimension to complement the three classical dimensions of psychodynamic, behavioral and humanistic psychology (Pedersen, 1999). A culture-centered perspective of these classical theories will enhance the validity and applicability of those theories across cultures much as the fourth dimension of time gives meaning to three-dimensional space. We know that significant changes are taking place in the practice of psychology, even though there is disagreement about the exact nature of these changes. We know that multiculturalism has become a significant domestic force in most cultures even though it has not yet developed a comprehensive global perspective. We know that multiculturalism has sometimes been used to rationalize oppression, as in South Africa, and as a consequence it has a bad reputation in some cultures. We know that it may be premature to describe multiculturalism as a fourth force at the present time. We know that the American version of multiculturalism is grounded in the individualistic values of that culture and may require changes to fit with a collectivistic context. We know that within-group differences in ethnic groups, such as age, gender, socioeconomic status and other special interests function "like" cultures, broadly defined, when they become salient. We know that cultural similarities---among youth for example---across cultures is often greater than similarities within any particular culture across generations. We know that a multicultural perspective is changing both the content and the process of our thinking itself. We know that making culture central enhances the meaningful usefulness of traditional psychological theories.

Sue (1998) describes the resistance to the idea of multiculturalism as a fourth force. (1) Multiculturalism is viewed as "competing" with already established theories. (2) The concept of multiculturalism and diversity has become associated in a negative way with regulatory rules of affirmative action, quotas, civil rights, discrimination, reverse discrimination, racism, sexism and political correctness. (3) Criticism of postmodernism has been expanded to include criticism of multiculturalism. (4) Those favoring a universalist perspective contend that good counseling works across cultures without modification. (5) Some contend that multiculturalism is too loosely defined to be taken seriously. (6) There is disagreement in the research measuring multicultural competencies in practice. (7) Some contend multiculturalism is too complex and it would be unrealistic to expect counselors to become multiculturally competent. (8) Others contend that more research is needed on multicultural competencies. (9) Some contend that multiculturalism can not be incorporated into the curriculum until "all" cultures are included. (10) Finally some believe that multiculturalism represents reverse racism and is "anti-white."

The multiculturally competent counselor also needs to be aware of the positive consequence of a culture-centered perspective (Pedersen et al., 2002). There are at least a dozen examples of the "up-side" from a culture-centered perspective:

1. Recognizing that all behavior is learned and displayed in a cultural context makes possible accurate assessment, meaningful understanding, and appropriate interventions in each cultural context.

2. People who express similar positive expectations or values through different culturally learned behaviors share "common ground" that allows them to disagree in their behavior while sharing the same ultimate positive values.
3. By recognizing the thousands of "culture teachers" each of us has internalized from friends, enemies, relatives, heroes, heroines, and fantasies, we can better understand the sources of our identities.
4. Just as a healthy ecosystem requires diversity in the gene pool, o a healthy society requires a variety of cultural perspectives for its psychological health.
5. Given our natural tendency to encapsulate ourselves, cultural diversity protects us from imposing our self-reference criteria inappropriately by challenging our assumptions.
6. Contact with cultures other than our own provides us with opportunities to rehearse adaptive functioning skills that will help us survive in the diversified global village of the future.
7. Social justice and moral development require the contrasting cultural perspectives of multiculturalism to prevent any one dominant group from holding the standards of justice hostage.
8. By looking at both cultural similarities and differences at the same time, according to a quantum metaphor, we are able to identify nonlinear alternatives to rigidly absolutist thinking.
9. We are able to continue our learning curve to match the rapid social changes around us by understanding all educational experiences as examples of culture shock.
10. In seeking spiritual completeness, we must complement our own understanding of Ultimate Reality with the different understandings by others.
11. The untried political alternative of cultural pluralism provides the only alternative to absolutism on the one hand and anarchy on the other.
12. A culture-centered perspective will strengthen the relevance and applicability of psychology by more adequately reflecting the complex and dynamic reality in which we all live.

The knowledge required by a multiculturally competent counselor includes an understanding of conventional textbook counseling as a necessary but not sufficient condition. Multicultural competence includes, in addition, an interdisciplinary expertise to include political, economic and social comprehension in addition to psychological understanding. While much of this information is available in textbooks much knowledge is also available in the counselor's own community through contact with resource persons who are both authentic to one or more particular culture and articulate in their ability to describe that culture as it is both similar to and different from the counselor trainee's culture. Immersion into unfamiliar cultures is an important learning experience for both students and faculty when that contact occurs under favorable conditions. This contact might occur either through sending students into the community or by bringing resource persons from the community into the classroom. Multicultural awareness of culturally



learned assumptions and multicultural knowledge leads to a meaningful comprehension at the third level in developing multiculturally appropriate skills.

### Developing Multicultural Skills

Multicultural skill competence involves finding the "common ground" between culturally different individuals or groups as the foundation of intrapersonal and interpersonal harmony. By defining culture broadly to include demographic, status and affiliation as well as ethnographic variables it becomes possible to re-frame relationships not normally thought of as cultural---such a conflict between a parent and child in the same family---into a relationship between two "cultures." The advantage of reframing relationships into cultural categories is that the two persons or groups might then disagree without either one being "wrong". The Interpersonal Cultural Grid provides a visual example of this process.

Table 1.  
Between-persons cultural grid

"EXPECTATIONS": WHY it was done	"BEHAVIORS": WHAT was done	
	Perceived Positive Action	Perceived Negative Action
Perceived Positive Intention	1	2
Perceived Negative Intention	3	4

The Grid includes four quadrants. Each quadrant explains parts of a relationship between two individuals or groups, recognizing that the salience of each quadrant may change over time and across situations and also recognizing that some part of the relationship will be in each of the four quadrants.

In the first quadrant the two have similar behaviors and also similar positive expectations. The relationship is congruent and harmonious and there is a positive expectation. Both persons are smiling (behavior) and both persons see one another as friends (positive expectation). While this quadrant is comfortable and free of conflict little learning is taking place and productivity is low.

In the second quadrant, the two have different behaviors but still share the same positive expectations. Both persons expect trust and friendliness, however each one is likely to interpret the other one's very different behavior incorrectly and possibly/probably hostile, when that behavior is interpreted out of context. For example, both persons have thought of one another as friends (positive expectation) but one is smiling and the other is shouting (different behavior). This quadrant is characteristic of "cross-cultural" relationships where each party is applying their own "self-reference criterion" to interpret the other's behavior and disregarding the other's different cultural context. The conditions of this second quadrant are very unstable and, unless the shared positive expectations are

quickly found and made explicit, the salience is likely to change toward the third more hostile quadrant. Multicultural skill is the ability to find common ground of positive shared expectations such as trust, respect and fairness as that positive expectation is expressed through different behaviors as in quadrant two.

In the third quadrant the two persons show the same behaviors but at least one now has hidden their different or negative expectations. This quadrant has less to do with culture and is more of an "interpersonal" conflict. The similar behaviors give the "appearance" of harmony, congruence and agreement but the hidden negative expectations will ultimately destroy the relationship. Although both persons are in disagreement this will not be obvious so one of them may continue to expect friendship, trust and respect while the other is now actually distrustful and unfriendly. Both persons may be smiling and "glad-handing" but one of them is pretending out of necessity or because he/she is being forced to do so. When you hold a gun to the other person's head they will behave however you want. When the stronger person forces the weaker person to change their behavior in the second quadrant the weaker person may comply but at the expense of losing friendship, trust and respect. If the actual difference in their expectations is ignored or undiscovered, the conflict will ultimately move to the fourth quadrant.

The fourth quadrant is where two people have different and/or negative expectations and they stop pretending to be congruent. This quadrant is an example of "going to war" with one another. They may not want to find shared positive expectations any longer and simply want to hurt one another. The disagreement in behaviors and expectations is now apparent. It is very difficult to mediate conflict in this quadrant. Unfortunately conflict frequently is not discovered until it reaches this fourth quadrant. The culturally competent counselor can prevent war by early intervention when the conflict is in the second or third quadrant, allowing both persons to build on their shared common ground without forcing either one to lose integrity.

The Interpersonal Cultural Grid demonstrates how culturally different people may share the positive expectation for trust, fairness, efficiency, effectiveness and safety even though their behaviors are quite different. To identify the expectations of culturally different clients the culturally competent counselor needs access to the hidden messages a client is thinking but not saying. One training design to identify the "hidden messages" in culture-centered counseling is The Triad Training Model (Pedersen, 2000b). When two people communicate there are three conversations going on at the same time: (1) the verbal exchange, (2) the counselor's internal dialogue and (3) the client's internal dialogue. The more cultural differences between the counselor and client the less likely that a counselor will accurately comprehend the client's internal dialogue. We can, however, expect part of the client's internal dialogue to be negative and part to be positive. A culturally competent counselor will be able to "hear" the positive and negative messages that a culturally-different client is thinking but not saying.

The Triad Training Model matches a counselor from one culture with a three-person coached team from the same contrasting culture. The team includes a coached client, coached "procounselor" (like an angel) and coached "anticounselor" (like a devil) to articulate the positive and negative messages the client may be thinking but not saying

during the interview. The counselor hears immediate and continuous feedback from the procounselor and anticounselor and can judge their accuracy by observing the client's reaction during the interview. These brief 5-8 minute role played interviews with debriefing feedback are designed to help counselor trainees (1) perceive the problem from the client's viewpoint, (2) recognize resistance in specific rather than vague general terms, (3) reduce counselor defensiveness and (4) learn recovery skills for getting out of trouble. Resource teams can be recruited from target culture populations and brought into the classroom to help counselors imagine more accurately what clients from those cultures are thinking but not saying in a counseling interview.

Multicultural skill builds on multicultural awareness and knowledge toward taking right actions at the right time in the right way and it provides the final test of a culturally competent counselor. Multicultural skills are difficult to evaluate because the same suggested action may not be credible to all persons in the other culture. Skill requires framing the solution in the client's cultural language and context. Skill requires testing stereotypes against the real and present situation and then modifying the stereotype accordingly. Skill requires culturally appropriate evaluation of the context so that resulting change will be constructive with positive consequences.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural competence complicates your life. However, it is important to remember that (1) complexity is your friend, not your enemy and (2) behavior is not meaningful until it is interpreted in the cultural context where that behavior was learned and is displayed. Culturally competent counselors have achieved an accurate awareness of their culturally learned assumptions as those assumptions might be both similar and different to the assumptions of culturally different clients. Culturally competent counselors comprehend the meaningful facts and information describing each client's cultural context. Culturally competent counselors are able to act appropriately to help the client achieve positive outcomes. Because culture is complicated counselors have been tempted to ignore or minimize their attention to a client's cultural context. The culturally competent counselor faces a difficult task and there is no easy way to accomplish that task.

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Paul Pedersen is Professor Emeritus from Syracuse University and Visiting Professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Hawaii. He has been on the faculty at The University of Minnesota, University of Hawaii and has taught for six years at universities in Indonesia, Malaysia and Taiwan. He is a Fellow in Division 9 (Social Issues) 17 (Counseling), 45 (Ethnic Minorities) and 52 (International) of The American Psychological Association. He has written, co-authored or edited 39 books, 73 chapters and 94 articles on multicultural counseling and/or communication issues. He was Director of the NIMH training program for "Developing Interculturally Skilled Counselors" (DISC) at the University of Hawaii for four years and was a Senior Fellow at the East West Center for five years. He received a Senior Fulbright award to teach at National Taiwan University for one year.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Identify an example of a culturally biased assumption in the counseling literature.
2. Discuss one of the arguments against developing multicultural competency by counselors.
3. Discuss the reasons for defining culture broadly to include ethnographic, demographic, status and affiliation variables.
4. Describe your own "multicultural self" using the awareness, knowledge and skill needs assessment.
5. Discuss one of the propositions in Multicultural Theory (MCT).
6. Discuss the extent to which multiculturalism can be described as a "fourth force" in counseling.
7. Discuss one example of the "up-side" in a culture-centered perspective
8. Give an example of the Interpersonal Cultural Grid as it might be used by a culturally competent counselor.

9. Provide a dialogue of a cross-cultural counseling interview with the hidden messages of an anticounselor and a procounselor written in.
10. Discuss the implications of the statements "complexity is your friend" and "behavior is not meaningful unless it is understood in context."