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The Imperativeness of Multiculturalism to Counselling Practice in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT The paper explored the challenges, which multiculturalism poses to counselling practice. Authors provided the benefits of multiculturalism in counselling practice, which include assisting clients to develop the ability to combat the debilitating effects of negative environmental forces.

Nigeria is multicultural nation with over 350 nationalities, with each entity having its own norms, values, beliefs and even language. This has tended to influence our ways of living and relationship with our neighbours. Our goals and aspirations in life are often a product of our culturally held valves. The implication of this to counselling practice in Nigeria is that our clients today come from very diverse ethnic groups with different norms, values and idiosyncrasies (Aluede and Maliki, 2000). Thus, the personal and cultural values, which we hold, often affect our utilization and acceptance of counselling services (Pedersen, 1991).

By understanding the differences among clients from a culture-centred framework, it becomes possible for persons to disagree without one being right and the other wrong. The culture-centred framework allows persons with culturally different behaviours to maintain their cultural differences while focusing on the common grounds of culturally similar expectations for fairness, trust or success for the counselling relationship (Axelson, 1993). The culture-centred framework acknowledges the importance of both cultural differences and cultural similarities by defining culture to include all potential roles or identities a person may have based on ethnographic, demographic status or affiliations (Pedersen and Ivey, 1994).

In relation to counselling, the culture-centred approach presumes that all counseling, to some extent, is multicultural. It also presumes that the client and counsellor's behaviours are determined by culturally learned assumptions and understanding. Those assumptions are accurately essential for effective counselling. Culture is not a specialized aspect of counselling, but, rather, it is the heart of all counselling. Counselling relationships, provide a framework for each counsellor to construct an approach to counselling that fits the clients' cultural identity (Axelson, 1993; Pedersen, 1991).

The cardinal thrust of this paper therefore is threefold: (a) meaning of multicultural counselling; (b) application of multiculturalism to counselling practice; and (c) challenges of multiculturalism to counselling practices in Nigeria

MEANING OF MULTICULTURAL COUNSELLING

Multicultural counselling is defined as the interface between counsellor and client that takes the personal dynamics of the counsellor or clients into consideration alongside the emerging, changing, and/or static configurations that might be identified in the cultures of the counsellor or the client (Axelson, 1993). Sue (1982) defined multicultural counselling as any counselling relationship in which two or more of the participants differ in cultural backgrounds, values and life style. Similarly, Jackson (1987) defined multicultural counselling as any counselling relationship in which counsellors and clients differ, with respect to cultural backgrounds, values, and lifestyles. These differences or similarities may be either real or perceived. Therefore, whether counselling is, in fact, multicultural depends on real and perceived cultural differences and similarities. Even though in reality they are culturally different, the interaction should not be labeled multicultural counselling if on the other hand, the counsellor and client are culturally similar but perceive each other as culturally different.

Pederson (1988) defined multicultural

counselling as a situation in which two or more people with different ways of perceiving their social environment are bought together in a helping relationship. However, to some respect, all counselling is multicultural, taking into account infinite counsellor/client combinations. Thus, in addition to distinctions of personality characteristics, the cultural similarity or dissimilarity of counsellor and client, based on their backgrounds of cultural experiences, are factors in achieving a major goal in counselling- to create a cultural environment wherein two people can communicate with and relate to each other.

Most people share some degree of culture in common with the general society. However, many also belong to groups that can be identified by their beliefs, feelings, values, and behaviours; conditioned for example, by their experiences related to race, ethnicity, sex, generation, religion, socioeconomic status, lifestyle, sexual preferences, or region of residence (Pedersen, 1988).

Multicultural counselling encompasses all the components of the many different cultural environments in a democratic society, together with the pertinent theories, techniques, and practices of counselling. In this regard, the approach takes into specific consideration the traditional and contemporary backgrounds and environmental experiences of diverse clients and how special needs might be identified and met through the resources of the helping professions (Pedersen, 1988).

APPLICATION OF MULTICULTURALISM TO COUNSELLING SITUATION

The role of multicultural counselling in personal and social development include: The study of issues that are faced by most of the people in the society; those that are faced by identified groups of people; and the examination of counselling practices and services for diverse groups (Axelson, 1993).

It is important for the counsellor to understand and respect useful modes of coping and treatment that are indigenous to specific groups and groups in different environments, the cultural relativity of the adjustment process and the world view of different population groups. It is also important for counselors to carefully examine the appropriateness of counselling practices in multicultural situations and how to work more effectively in a multicultural society. To avoid professional encapsulation, it is essential for counsellors to review their own cultural biases as well as the cultural biases of their clients. In this regard it is not so much what counsellor do that counts but their professional encapsulation. The concept of cultural encapsulation in counselling was introduced many years ago (Wrenn, 1985, cited in Pedersen, 1991). This perspective assumes five basic identifying features: First, counselors should define reality according to one set of cultural assumptions and stereotypes, which become more important than the real world. Second, we become insensitive to cultural variations among individuals and assume that our view is the only real or legitimate one. Third, each of us has the unreasoned assumptions, which we accept without proof and which we protect without regard to rationality. Fourth, a technique-oriented job definition further contributes toward and preserves the encapsulation. Fifth, when there is no evaluation of other viewpoints, then there is no responsibility to accommodate or interpret the behaviour of others except from the view point of self-reference criterion (Axelson, 1993; Pedersen and Ivey, 1994)).

This tendency to depend on one authority, one theory and one truth has been demonstrated to be extremely dangerous in political setting. It is no less dangerous in a counselling context. The encapsulated counsellor is trapped in one way of thinking that resists adaptation and rejects alternatives, which should be avoided by counsellors in a multicultural society (Axelson, 1993).

In terms of what counsellors do, a culture-based approach requires that the appropriateness of existing counselling theories and practices, needs of individuals and the demands placed on individuals, by the society and culture. For example, diagnosis and treatment of a middle-class suburbanite who suffers from paranoia and depression, imagining being followed by gangs, may be different from diagnosis and treatment of a poverty-stricken ghetto-urbanite who also suffers from paranoia and depression and the same fear of being followed by gangs (Axelson, 1993).

Though socioeconomic status and place of residence are only two of many categories of cultural influences, they account for many of the experiences that affect the social and personal adjustment or development of nearly all people.

Fears that may be non-rational in a middle-class neighbourhood might well be reality-based in a poverty stricken neighbourhood. Though the psychological pain and sniffing of all people at all socioeconomic levels is similar, their sources may relate to socioeconomic class. For instance, pressures that surface in counselling middle-class populations often include worries about job promotion, perfectionism, feelings of inferiority due to overweight and the related eating disorders of anorexia and bulimia, depression at the thought of getting old, or a sense of meaninglessness in life. Life-threatening situations and daily survival problems are more often encountered in lower socioeconomic populations, among which depression may be a normal reaction to the environment and paranoia may be justified fear. The pains of meeting basic needs are often given attention before emotional pains, and the sufferer may postpone seeking counselling assistance for unattended psychological stress until the need is extreme, manifesting at self in feelings of rejection, anger, not being a part of society, and not having the freedom for options and choices (Axelson, 1988, cited in Axelson, 1993).

Multiculturalism emerges as a generic approach to counselling and as a force with an articulated impact on counselling equivalent to behaviourism, psychodynamics and humanism. Multicultural counselling does provide a valuable metaphor for understanding others and ourselves. It is no longer possible for counsellors to ignore their own culture or the culture of their clients (Pedersen, 1991).

Multicultural counselling provides a unique perspective in which two persons can disagree without one being right, and the other being wrong when their arguments are based on culturally different assumptions. It becomes possible for a counsellor to identify common grounds between two apparently culturally different people whose expectations and ultimate goals are the same even though their bahaviours may be very different. Even the same individual may change his or her cultural referent group during the course of interview—from emphasizing sex, to age, to socioeconomic status, to nationality or ethnicity, to one or another affiliation. It is expected that the counsellor would be skilled enough to understand that each of this changing salient cultures require different understanding and interpretation of that person's behaviour. The counsellor who is knowledgeable in diverse culture will be able to accurately assess the person's changing behaviour. The same culturally learned behaviour may have different meaning for different people even for the same person across times and situations (Pedersen, 1988).

CHALLENGES OF MULTICULTURALISM TO COUNSELLING PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Helping professionals and researchers in many multicultural societies like Nigeria, continue to face challenging tasks of articulating their own culturally shaped values and assumptions and appreciating paradigmatic diversity and plurality in meaning-making and construction of realities. To work effectively with clients, the counsellor is required to understand emphatically the client's world of values, meanings, and fallings, and to deal with the socio-cultural and systematic influence upon clients' perceptions and experience of personal difficulties and concerns (Pedersen, 1991).

There are many changes occurring in society, which will increase the urgency of enlightening culture-bound counsellors. The increasing proportion of diverse ethnic groups, particularly the minorities, the tribal wars between the Ijaws, Itsekiris and the Uhrobos in Delta state, the tribal wars between the Igbos and the Hausa in the northern parts of Nigeria, the constant violent conflict between the Oduduwa Peoples' Congress (OPC) and the Hausas in the western part of Nigeria and many others ought to require much more attention to culturally different perspectives in counselling in Nigeria. The diverse variety of special interest groups who are beginning to define their separate cultural identities will even require and demand equal attention. The culture-bound counsellor's competence comes under attack not merely for immoral behaviour but in some ways more seriously, for inaccurate assessment of the multicultural situation. The multicultural counsellor would require special and remedial attention to fit the multicultural reality of the modern world (Pedersen, 1991).

In the past, changes in the counselling profession have always been 'top-down', driven by a particular theory, a handful of experts or a method, which counsellors have 'tried on' and found useful. The current revolution in counselling is quite different as a wide range of culturally different consumer groups is changing

counselling from a "bottom-up" perspective. In order to respond to multiculturalism, counselling will need to become more consumer-driven and responsive to the cultural context of each client. Only by making culture central to the counselling process can counsellors achieve the level of accuracy and effectiveness toward which the profession of counselling the world over aspires (Pedersen, 1995).

In the same vein, while it is important to infuse our practice with interculturally oriented strategies and knowledge, counsellors in Nigeria in particular, are not expected to become cultural anthropologists. However, they need to adopt a position that would place culture at the centre of human and systemic interactions and interpretations. Pedersen (1991) identified four benefits of defining culture broadly within the therapeutic domain, which he noted could make counsellors to:

(i) more accurately match a client's intended and culturally learned expectations with the client's actual behaviour;
(ii) become more aware of how their own culturally learned perspecive predisposes them toward a particular decision outcome;
(iii) become more sensitive of the complexity in cultural identity patterns; and.
(iv) track the ever-changing salience of a client's different interchangeable cultural identities within a therapeutic interview.

In like manner, Rigazio-Digillo and Ivey (1995) offer a clearer understanding on how counsellors can assume a broad cultural perspective in their work. In that regard they pointed to the fact that all clients should have the opportunity to express their idiosyncratic worldview within the safety of the therapeutic relationship. Additionally, counsellors must be aware of how their own culturally shaped worldviews govern their professional functioning. In addition, they must safeguard the rights of their clients and ensure that they do not in any situation quickly label and treat in a fashion that discounts their uniqueness.

The contributions of schemata and knowledge within the general tenets of Development Counselling and Therapy (DCT) and Systemic Cognitive Development Therapy (SCDT) orientations can assist counsellors to assess clients' worldviews. By recognizing that culture permeates all worldviews and that families are a major force of that worldview, counsellors can more directly account for cultural variances within their treatment plans. In adopting a development and co-constructive rather than deficit model of client functioning, counsellors will gain access to cultural data and how to use these data to design treatment plans that match and mismatch clients' orientations (Rigazio - Digillo and Ivey, 1995).

The goal of culturally centered treatment is to help each client develop a wide set of options to draw upon to work through developmental issues. Development Counselling and Therapy and Systemic Cognitive Development Therapy provide counsellors with a wide range of therapies to conceive, implement, and monitor culturally sensitive therapy (Rigazio- Digillio and Ivey, 1995).

The main thrust of multicultural counselling practice, has been to assist clients in developing their ability to use resources to effectively combat the debilitating effects of negative environmental forces. The goal of counselling therefore involves helping people of diverse culture develop functional environment mastery behaviours that lead to personal adjustment and optimal mental health (Pederson,1995). In addition, counsellors would be expected to take new directions in their efforts to empower themselves. These new directions include employing modalities that incorporate elements of the immediate environment, raise consciousness, and focus on group solidarity to promote active change. This implies that counsellor-as-advocate concept, requires that part of the role of a multicultural counselling professional must be to channel his or her efforts into helping clients from ethnic groups breakdown, institutional and social barriers that impede development (Lee, 1991).

Communication barriers are another area that poses problem to culture-centred counsellors. The culture-centred counsellors will be able to mediate effectively between different cultural perspectives and communicate accurately if the counsellors develop two basic capabilities: Be able to identify greater number of relevant cultural variables at any given moment; and be able to keep track of the constantly changing salience of cultural variables as the situation changes from moment to moment (Pedersen and Ivey, 1994).

CONCLUSION

Helping professionals (including counsellors) in many multicultural societies like Nigeria, USA,

Canada, South Africa, Zimbabwe, etc, continue to face challenging tasks of articulating and appreciating paradigmatic diversity and plurality in meaning-making and construction of realities. To work effectively with clients from a different cultural background, it is suggested that the counsellor should understand empathetically the client's world of values, meanings and feelings. Thus, it is expected that these counsellors are knowledgeable in how a cultural system affects people's ways of processing their emotional problems. In that wise, counsellors would know how to effectively counsel their clients who may come from a different culture.

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