

The human diversity
in a counselling
environment
sociology essay



In today's society the concept of both identity and human diversity have become both an integral and important aspect of people's daily lives. In the case of a counsellor's role, where a mutually trusting therapeutic environment is conducive to the success of any outcomes of therapy, it has become paramount for today's professional counsellor to acknowledge and address these issues when entering into any therapeutic relationship with clients.

With global migration easily available to many individuals, the World has become a profoundly multicultural, multiethnic and multinational place, with many millions of people moving to live within new cultures. As a result it is estimated that one in every 35 people is such an international immigrant. (Lago, 2011) Such a change in the demographics of potential clients for any counsellor/psychotherapist today has resulted in a high probability that they will come in to contact with individuals of differing race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs or other ideologies.

The issues regarding identity is invariably complex and can be continually changing (Kettle, 2004) and needs to be successfully navigated by the counsellor to ensure a mutually respectful relationship is created between them and the client in order for any therapeutically beneficial outcome to be achieved. If these identity issues are not addressed the effect could be very harmful and detrimental to any potential relationship due to the dynamics of power and control between the client and counsellor (McKenzie, 1986; Lago, 2011). This essay will describe the key issues of what it is that gives us our identity and what it means to be diverse.

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A simple definition for diversity can be given as being ‘ very different’ (Oxforddictionaries. com, 2012). It can however, be argued that it is much more than that. It is having an understanding that each individual person is unique and recognising those individual differences. For a counsellor and their client it is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual and discovering how they may affect both the counsellor and client in developing a healthy working relationship.

The advent of Rogers third force of psychotherapy, the client centred approach in the 1960’s, introduced the idea that the client should be both the focus and at the very centre of the therapeutic session (Rogers, 1957). This soon led to the concept that an acceptance of a client’s identity and culture is paramount to these aims being met. The term ‘ the culturally encapsulated counsellor’ was introduced by Wrenn (1962) to critique a universalistic approach to counselling which soon came to be known as multicultural counselling, which today is regarded by many therapists as the fourth force in psychotherapy/counselling.

Multicultural counselling is what takes place when a counsellor and their client are from differing cultural groups. Cultural identity itself however is not simply defined by the colour of a person’s skin or the geographical location or even their ethnicity, it can encompass a multitude of factors. Gender, religious beliefs, social economic status, sexual orientation are all identity factors that a culturally encapsulated counsellor needs to be aware of, not <https://assignbuster.com/the-human-diversity-in-a-counselling-environment-sociology-essay/>

only from the clients perspective but also to have a good self awareness of their own cultural identity. (Middleton, et al., 2011)

The issue of race and ethnic identity comprises of several factors which include an understanding of more than just what it is to black or white. A sense of identification with what whiteness means as compared to being part of a racial/ethnic minority group, including the importance of the difference between race and culture itself is critical to becoming an effective multicultural counsellor. It is vital that counsellors do not assume, for example, that all blacks or all Asians have similar cultural backgrounds. There are various ethnic identifications that exist within each of these racial groups such as language, religion, or gender roles and whilst it is true many of these ethnic groups share the physical characteristics of race, they may not necessarily share the same value and belief structures (Katz, 1985).

Some examples of these ethnic identifications can be seen in the cultural value system of many black Africans, where a great value is placed on the concept of family, especially their children, who are seen as a gift from God. There is a great emphasis on their sense of community and their place in it. Personal wellbeing becomes secondary to that of social conflict resolution, which is seen as more important, to ensure peace and equilibrium within the community. Another example can be seen within the Chinese cultural environment, where passivity rather than assertiveness is revered. Quiescence rather than verbal articulation is seen as a sign of wisdom and there is the role of the "all-knowing father" that the Chinese respect for authority bestows on them (Ching and Prosen, 1980).

The fact that traditional counselling therapies have been developed upon the research with predominantly middle classed white men indicates a propensity towards gender bias within the profession. It has even been reported that some professional counsellors have evaluated female clients as less competent than male clients (Balkin, Schlosser and Levitt, 2009).

Aspects of gender can be also affected by religious attitudes from both the counsellor and client, either of which may have more traditional beliefs about specific gender roles and behaviour. There are also certain individuals or groups who adhere to religious fundamentalism which should be taken into consideration, which places women in the more traditional roles other than those chosen by more modern contemporary women. These fundamentalists have been seen to exhibit strong sexist behaviour in regards to issues of gender (Balkin, Schlosser and Levitt, 2009).

It is clear that religious identity has been shown play a pivotal role for both the client and the counsellor within the therapeutic process. It is suggested that highly religious people have a tendency to believe they have stronger moral attributes than those of non-religious people (Hunter, 2001 cited in Balkin, Schlosser and Levitt, 2009, p. 420). In the case of a highly religious counsellor, such a bias could cause complications within the counselling environment in regards to issues such as homophobia, gender bias and racism. It could be argued that when faced with issues such as homosexuality, which is regarded as a sin in many conservative religions, it could give rise to problems with dealing with clients who fall into the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender group for the highly religious counsellor (Balkin, Schlosser and Levitt, 2009).

A person's gender/sexual orientation could be argued as being one of the more complex identity issues, with its anonymity and invisibility being a large factor that can create problems for both counsellor and client. Despite a growing public awareness of gender identity with the acceptance of trans-identified celebrities on popular television such as Graham Norton and Gok Wan, there can be a certain amount of confusion for the counsellor when working with transgender clients as the distinction between gender and sexuality is prone to being misunderstood. (Hawley, 2011)

Sexual orientation generally refers to a person's sexual object choice, as in whether we choose to have sex with male or with females. As a result the options are to be straight (heterosexual), gay (homosexual) or bisexual. For most people the determination of sexuality is dependent on the gender of the individuals, i. e.: male/female, male/male, and female/female. However for some this is more complex for what if your gender was unknown to you? For some, this issue goes beyond the physical sexuality of their bodies; it is subject to behaviours, social acceptance and/or belonging to specific groups to which their allocated sex consigns them. (Hawley, 2011)

For the counsellor, it is important to be aware of the multiple possibilities that fall within gender/sexuality identification. Pre-judgement and bias is an all too easy mistake for the inexperienced counsellor to make about sexuality, with the arrival of a cross dressing client. Similarly the client themselves may be feeling terrified and in a state of bewilderment as to their own feelings, in such instances a open minded and understanding therapist would be considered a lifeline. (Hawley, 2011)

In an effort to address the diversity of clients in the counselling environment, a number of models have been introduced to the counselling professional in an effort to provide adequate training in the areas of race, culture, ethnicity and other areas of diversity as key variables in understanding the representations of psychological distress in clients (Moodley, 2005). Sue, Arredondo and McDavis (1992) states that counsellors who practice without adequate training or competence when working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds are prone to practicing unethically and with potentially harmful actions, which borders on a violation of human rights.

Sue and Sue (1990) identified three areas in which a culturally skilled counsellor could become proficient in multiculturalism. The first is the process of becoming aware of their own assumptions about human behaviour, values, biases, preconceived notions and personal limitations. Secondly, is the attempt to understand and share the worldview of their culturally different client with respect and appreciation and without imposing any negative judgments. Thirdly and finally, a culturally skilled counsellor is someone who actively develops and puts into practice appropriate, relevant and sensitive intervention strategies utilising skills when working with their diverse clients. However, since the publication and formal adoption by the American Counselling Association of the Sue, et al. (1982) multicultural counselling competencies (MCC) model, some researchers have noted that little empirical research has been carried out to evaluate the model itself (Chao, 2012).

Patterson (1996) states that multicultural counselling is generic in nature and as such all counselling is multicultural. It is not hard to accept the <https://assignbuster.com/the-human-diversity-in-a-counselling-environment-sociology-essay/>

uniqueness of each individual client when you consider the infinite number of combinations and permutations of identify. As such to try and develop a different counselling technique for each one would be an insurmountable task. There appears to be an emphasis on the difference in values between diverse cultures, but it should be acknowledged that so many of these different values are actually customs, lifestyles, habits, social norms and as such common to many different groups and even considered to be universally accepted values (Patterson, 1996).

The success of the existing models within counselling/psychotherapy should not be so easily abandoned in an attempt to become more culturally diverse. Any compromise of the westernised therapeutic psychological models should be limited as has been suggested through the intervention of a more multicultural approach when working with ethnically diverse clients, for diluting the process would surely lead to a less effective service being provided (Patterson, 1996)

Sue & Sue (1990) acknowledged that the core conditions such as unconditional positive regard, respect and acceptance of the individual, an empathic relationship of understanding the clients problem from their own perspective and allowing the client to explore their own core values and reach their own solutions are counselling qualities that may transcend culture.

Rogers (1957) claimed that there are five basic qualities that all counsellors need to become an effective counsellor and as such create an effective therapeutic relationship. The nature of this relationship has been well

established within the counselling environment and is the same, regardless of whatever cultural, ethnic, gender or social group a client belongs to.

Having respect for clients, trusting them to make the right decisions, take responsibility for themselves. Genuiness, where the counsellor acts like a real person, not coming across as the all knowing expert or using a battery of techniques on the client. Empathic understanding for a client is more than simply having the knowledge of the group to which they belong. It is being able to use this knowledge to enter the clients world by invitation through self disclosure by the client, which is related to the degree of respect and genuiness displayed towards the client. (Rogers, 1957; Patterson, 1996)

It is essential that communication of these qualities is perceived and felt by the client during the therapeutic process in order for them to be effective. The understanding of cultural differences in both verbal and non-verbal behaviours can overcome some of the difficulties encountered when dealing with culturally diverse clients. It can also be said that these qualities are not only essential for an effective counselling environment but also facilitate all interpersonal relationships. Being neither time-bound or culture-bound they can encompass all issues of identity within the counselling environment. (Patterson, 1996)