RACE, CULTURE AND COUNSELLING

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IN COLLABORATION WITH
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Race, Culture and Counselling

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In loving memory of Barry Troyna

Dedications

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We wish to dedicate this book to all of the people who struggle and strive to make this world a better place for us all to live in, to all of those who have nurtured and inspired us on our personal journeys, and to those who have helped us towards writing this book.

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Foreword

I am extremely honoured to write the foreword to this book. I first met the authors in the fall of 1986, when we were involved in planning a bilateral conference on issues of cultural diversity and counselling in the United Kingdom and the United States. This conference spawned a professional collaboration that has established a transatlantic exchange of ideas on multicultural counselling issues and practices. The authors have become respected colleagues and valued friends.

Through our collaborative efforts we have discovered that issues of race and culture are critically important and challenging to counselling. Scores of mental health professionals in both the United Kingdom and the United States seem to be ill prepared to provide culturally appropriate counselling services to a diverse population. Many are searching for new ways to intervene successfully into the lives of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This search is made even more urgent by demographic projections that suggest that racial and cultural diversity will have an even greater impact on both societies in the next century.

This book, therefore, is not only timely, but critical to the future of counselling theory and practice in the United Kingdom and beyond. It is an excellent synthesis of traditional and contemporary ideas related to issues of race and culture in counselling. The authors have presented in this volume a brilliant and comprehensive examination of the complex and often vexing issues that must be addressed if counselling is to be empowering, as opposed to oppressive, for individuals from minority or disenfranchised groups. While the book in its entirety is profoundly important, several chapters are worthy of special note. These chapters, in particular, raise the level of scholarship on issues of race and culture in counselling in Great Britain into an important new dimension. They include the chapters dealing with issues of race and power, cultural barriers to communication, indigenous approaches to helping, filmed cases, the culture of the counselling organization, supervision, training, and research.

No doubt, many ideas presented in these chapters and the remainder of the book will evoke strong feelings among readers. Some will become angry or defensive, while others will have their cultural ideas and experiences validated by the authors' arguments. No matter how you are personally affected, however, this book will challenge most of your assumptions about how to address appropriately the issues of counselling in a multicultural society. It will force you to move beyond your zone of professional comfort and assess your competence as a counsellor.

The work of Colin Lago and Joyce Thompson in this book makes a significant contribution to the literature on multicultural counselling. They have also helped to advance the theory base on counselling practice in the United Kingdom with their efforts. This book provides a major stimulus for the development or greater appreciation of the importance of cultural responsiveness in counsellor training and practice. It provides a new lens with which to view counselling theory and practice. The ideas presented here are an important effort in freeing counselling from the narrow confines of traditional thinking. Lago and Thompson's work provides a helping framework which allows for equal access and opportunities to all people regardless of race or culture.

Courtland Lee
Professor of Counsellor Education
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Introduction

This book seeks to explore some of the major dimensions and subtleties underlying the issues of race and culture and how these might impact upon counselling and psychotherapy relationships.

We have long been concerned about the nature of oppression and how discriminatory practices occur. Our professional experience within British society has exposed us directly to people, who, because of their differing cultural and or racial origins, have been discriminated against.

We have previously worked together on training projects, writing tasks and the production of a training video on this subject.

Despite the British context, many of the issues and concerns discussed here will be applicable to therapists in many other societies and cultures having culturally and racially different clients.

The climate in which the contents of this book are set, described more fully in Chapter 1, is a profoundly complex one in terms of history, population complexity, political perspectives and a huge range of cultural identities. All this is further compounded by discrimination and racism. Both counsellors and clients are participants in this climate, and as such, are subject to the multitude of complex forces and attitudes that shape people's lives.

Counsellors and psychotherapists have to acknowledge that their assumptions and beliefs about and attitudes towards those who are culturally and racially different may well be oversimplistic, judgemental and discriminatory. At worst and as a consequence, therapeutic aims may well have anti-therapeutic outcomes.

The dialogical approach of counselling and psychotherapy has now come of age alongside other healing approaches within many societies.

The challenges to counsellors are many:

- Do they understand the impact of their own past upon their assumptions about culture, identity, morals and so on?
- Do they understand the discriminatory nature and power imbalance of the

relationship between dominant and minority groups in society and how such practices are perpetuated?

- Can they enhance their own learning about the groups from which clients come?
- Are they open to a wide range of challenging and perhaps contradictory views of the world expressed by clients?
- How might their theories and models of counselling be extended or modified to incorporate a wider range of understanding and response modes to clients?
- How might their way of being with clients recognize and address the societal and political implications (as well as the emotional and psychological implications) of the client's situation?

'Counsellors are trained to work in a sensitive, skilled and theoretically informed manner with individuals seeking help.' This is the opening sentence of Chapter 2. In order to work with culturally and racially different clients, therapists will also require an understanding of how contemporary society works in relation to race, the exercise of power, the effects of discrimination, stereotyping, how ideologies sabotage policies and so on. In short, counsellors require a structural awareness of society.

A broad overview of those engaged in the counselling profession would show that many practitioners hold strongly humanitarian world views. However, counsellors are not necessarily aware of the nature or extent of the structural inequalities that so adversely affect black people's lives nor are clearly aware of their own position in those issues. For many white people who believe themselves to be tolerant, understanding, accepting and so on, it is often very difficult to appreciate the multiplicity of mechanisms in society that perpetuate systems of disadvantage amongst black people.

Chapter 3 opens with a quote stressing the complexity of the word 'culture' and continues with an examination of what differences in culture might mean. Despite very sincere attempts to understand clients' inner realities, counsellors, like all human beings, do respond initially on the basis of their own prejudices. The impact of their perception of and then judgement of difference might prevent any therapeutic progress whatsoever.

Fortunately we have experienced situations where – even though clients have had profoundly different cultural origins to ourselves – a process of counselling has been helpful. Cultural difference itself is not necessarily a barrier to effective therapy though it can cause immense confusion, because culture profoundly affects people's ways of being, their behaviour, their interpersonal relationships, their notions of meaning and so on.

When people share cultural origins and understandings, they share, often without any awareness, sufficient 'recipes' for understanding each other's present behaviour and predicting their future behaviour. Culturally different persons do not enjoy these shared assumptions, thus emphasizing the importance of therapists becoming culturally informed.

While communication constitutes part of the visible and audible aspects of people's behaviour, the inner origins of such messages come from the complex inner workings of their minds, their emotions, their memories, their relationships and so on. This book encourages counsellors to understand more fully their inner complexities and specifically their own cultural barriers to communication; the topic is specifically considered in Chapter 4.

This chapter offers a very wide range of ideas concerning cultural differences in behaviour. This considerable range of information has deliberately been included to demonstrate the enormous extent of the potential behavioural differences that could occur between counsellors and their culturally different clients.

The relationship between language, thought and experience is one of great complexity and is considered in Chapter 5. It is our view that transcultural issues must not be reduced to the limiting interpretations of the function of language and language differences.

We suggest that language has potential for infinite creativity and conveys the speaker's capacity for ingenuity, invention, and figurative, idiomatic and allusive expression. Taken from this philosophical stance, language always has the potential to express thought and to acknowledge experience. As counselling philosophy implicitly recognizes the potential for growth in people, it would seem important to understand that the nature of language within the counselling process always has the potential of achieving its task of articulating and making understandable the client's agenda.

The process of counselling, with its accent on acceptance, listening and dialogue, has the potential to provide persons from minority groups or low-esteem positions with the opportunity to speak, practice, experiment with and thus create and develop their 'word', their symbols of meaning. Counselling, in this sense, contributes to a language and a confidence derived from clients' own explorations of their situation.

This perspective demonstrates the complex relationship between language and power. If the client, through psychotherapy, develops their language or a confidence in their view of the world, much has been achieved. On the other hand, the therapist must pay attention to their own use of language and its potential negative effects upon clients. Also, counsellors must take responsibility for interacting in the language requested by the client.

Counsellors are significantly influenced in the ways they approach, reflect upon and predict the outcome of their work by the tutorial and theoretical influences they were exposed to whilst in training or in post. Many of the current theories of therapy are rooted, historically, in central European and North American cultures. Chapter 6 offers an explanation of some of these and subsequently presents some critiques where they are compared with non-western approaches.

The writings of western therapists frequently feature metaphors such as process, rhythm, dance and journey in attempting to describe their work. Positive inferences may be drawn from these perspectives in relation to

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therapists' interest in and capacity of openness towards other cultures, disciplines and belief systems.

The nature of persons who become psychotherapists is extremely fascinating and further complicates the relationship between theory, practice and culture as embedded in the persona of the counsellor.

The ways people cope, attempt to solve their problems and seek assistance are shaped by the social and cultural norms and the symbolic meanings within their culture. In addition, differences also exist between cultures on what is even deemed as problematic.

A matrix of healing approaches first mentioned in Chapter 1 is reintroduced in Chapter 7 and offers a conceptual model for understanding a complete range of helping interventions. This section introduces the reader to a wide range of non-Eurocentric healing methods and reminds us that long before western medicine recognized the fact, African traditional healers had taken the position that ecology and interpersonal relations affect people's health.

Healers around the world have shaped and developed 'spontaneous experiences' to arrive at highly elaborated healing systems. Meditation traditions, drum and dance-related trance-inducing systems and healing practices employing psychedelic drugs are well-known examples.

Most western therapies emphasize the individual; the healing forms described in Chapter 7 have a much more community or family focus.

We have to recognize this breadth and complexity of spectrum of healing approaches embedded in all societies and note that each has its validity within the cultural frameworks from which it originates. In addition, there are often similarities between the forms of activity used by different cultures, e.g. trance states, though the rituals may be differently structured.

Chapter 8 offers a series of transcripts taken from transcultural counselling interviews that may be used for training and discussion purposes.

Historically the literature on transcultural counselling has substantially ignored organizational and systemic issues. Chapter 9 attempts to confront this vacuum by considering the nature of the organizational context within which counselling takes place. The location within which the therapy takes place might be, for some clients, as important as the therapy itself.

All cultures have conventions influenced both by codes and practices related to hospitality. These conventions influence both design and layout of buildings as well as informing interpersonal behaviours. The whole of Chapter 9 is concerned with stimulating a consideration of how counselling organizations can create the conditions (physical, psychological and emotional) within which successful therapy can occur.

Supervision, training and research are the subjects of the final three chapters. Each of these facets that prepare, support and underpin therapist practice have immense significance for the development of transculturally sensitive and skilled therapists. These elements overlay a deep concern for

ethical and effective therapeutic practice in the interests of all clients living in multicultural and multiracial societies.

We are concerned that counselling and psychotherapy does not become a further oppressive or damaging instrument of society, but that it continues to aspire to be an appropriately liberating and therapeutic force for any troubled individuals, families or groups seeking psychological help and emotional support.

We have deliberately used various terms interchangeably within this book in relation to the helping or therapeutic process. We are aware of the current debate about differences between counselling and psychotherapy. Our concern here, whatever these differences are, is to address all who aspire, through the skills of listening, relating and dialogue, to relieve others' suffering. We hope that the various terms used, for example, counsellor, counselling, psychotherapist, therapist, psychotherapy and so on, facilitate easy reading.

There are also a range of terms used in the book to describe the activity of counselling a client from another racial or cultural background. In recent times these terms have included 'crosscultural', 'intercultural', 'transcultural' and 'multicultural'. In most instances we have used the conventions of 'transcultural', a term increasingly popular in British literature and 'multicultural', a term current within the United States.

Similarly we have used terms such as 'culturally different', 'racially different', 'black and white' as variously descriptive of counsellors and clients. Where we have used the terms 'black and white' we intend these to be interpreted in their political sense, where blackness is used to describe those who are not the traditional power holders or members of a dominant majority group in a society.

Language can age very quickly and connotative meanings may thus swing from having positive to negative effects. Consequently we have avoided giving precise definitions and interpretations to these terms. We encourage, rather, the reader to appreciate our attempts to address the lived complexity of such helping relationships, whatever the current definitions are.

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