Impact on Growing Diversity & Multi-Cultural Counseling at Work Place in Singapore: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has contributed to the growth of a culturally diverse workforce in the world, including Singapore. The prevailing influx of foreign talents and immigrants in the last decade has led to growing diversity and multi-cultural trends in the workplace. There is a growing need to develop tools that could help in the operationalization of multi-cultural competencies so as to help counselors develop the awareness, knowledge and skills needed to build culturally-sensitive working alliance and adopt culturally appropriate interventions in counseling.

Keywords: Diversity; Multi-culturalism; Globalization; Counseling

INTRODUCTION

The beginnings of the concept of multi-culturalism could be traced to Horace Kallen who advocated for cultural pluralism in America and arguing against assimilation and melting-pot theories of his times. However, it was sociologist, Stuart Hall who became known as the godfather of multi-culturalism because of his influential contributions in the fields of sociology and cultural studies, especially in the area of race, ethnicity and gender. He defined multi-culturalism as "strategies and policies adopted to govern and manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multicultural societies throw up." Also, according to him, the term, 'multi-cultural', when used adjectively then "describes the social characteristics and problems of governance posed by any society in which different cultural communities live together and attempt to build a common life while retaining some of their 'original' identity [1].

In countries like Singapore and Canada, multi-culturalism has contributed to some degree of social integration and harmony, as accommodation and tolerance of different cultures is being institutionalized into legislation, so that it becomes part of the country's value and over all culture. In 1971, Canada adopts multi-culturalism as an official policy. Such an ideology in theory validates the dignity and value of all citizens regardless of racial or ethnic origins, language, or religion. The purpose of such a policy is for the integration of people from diverse ethnic origins into the Canadian society by promoting equality through active participation in the country's social, cultural, economic and political affairs [2,3]. The social psychology approach would study multi-culturalism from the perspective of social representation of a collective shared system of "values, ideas and practices" [4-6] and propose the "conceptualization of multi-culturalism as a system of social knowledge embedded in everyday practice and ways of thinking" [6,7]. Therefore, in order to clarify the definition of multi-culturalism for this study, there is a need to understand it in the specific context of counseling. In the field of counseling and psychology, the concept of multi-culturalism needs to extend beyond ethnic and cultural categories to include diversity factors. This is because a person's cultural identity is influenced and shaped by cultural, contextual, and as well as diversity factors [8-12].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cheung emphasizes the important relationship between culture and psychopathology. She suggests that "culture defines what constitutes problems and explains the nature and cause of these problems" [13,14]. A multi-cultural psychology would be concerned with "the psychological reactions of individuals and groups caught up in culturally heterogeneous settings" including the "behaviors, perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes" that result from living in such conditions [15]. When applied specifically to the context of the counseling relationship between the counselor and the client, it is interested in how the interaction of different cultural identities in the context of counseling affects the outcomes of the counseling process.

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According to Cheung counseling needs to be deconstructed in the context of the specific culture that it is being applied to, for it to be effective and relevant [14,15]. This review then seeks to understand the multi-cultural counseling as it is applied to the context of multi-cultural Singapore.

Singapore and multiculturalism

In Singapore, multi-culturalism has become the national policy in nation building since her independence in 1965. The multi-racial composition of a society's population constitutes the empirical reality of everyday life in many post-colonial states such as Singapore. Singapore, a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-cultural society was originally a country of immigrants mainly from Malaya, Indonesia, China and Europe. Initially the Malays, who were the natives, formed the majority of the population. By 1871, the Chinese took over the number one position as the largest ethnic group, pushing the Malays to second place.

As mentioned, the rapid influx of migrant workers and foreign talents, has contributed to changing demographic trends in multi-cultural Singapore. The influx of foreign talents and immigrants into Singapore has also contributed to a rise in transcultural marriages and families. Hence, the multi-culturalism policy of Singapore today faces the challenge of cultivating an inclusive attitude of cultural tolerance and social integration towards the culturally diverse of migrant populations [16]. In its practice of multi-culturalism as a national policy, Singapore continues to face the intrinsic tension between "trying to create a common unifying Singaporean identity while, on the other hand, persistently emphasizing the racial and the ancillary cultural differences between Singaporeans" [17].

Changes in the demographics of society has indeed brought with it new challenges to the workplace, as well as to the counseling profession in Singapore. One such challenge is the need for counselors to be better equipped in multi-cultural counseling competencies in their professional training, so they can be more effective in building a culturally sensitive working alliance with the culturally diverse.

Counseling in context with cultural identities

Counseling in the context of multi-cultureless therefore needs to consider not just ethnic and cultural factors but diversity issues such as age, gender, ability, religion, language, social-economic status and issues, political factors, sexual orientation and the global environment. Since both the client and counselor bring their unique cultural identities into the counseling, the interaction that happens between them is a process of multi-cultural interaction [12,18]. If therapeutic alliance is so key to effective therapeutic outcomes, then counselors need to work at building culturally-sensitive working relationship with their clients [19,20]. To do so they need to develop multi-cultural competencies as part of their core professional competencies [9,10,12].

Definition and understanding of multi-cultural counseling in global terms

Defining and understanding multi-cultureless in the context of the field of counseling is a key foundational concept of this research paper. It is therefore, pertinent to discuss the literature review related to multi-cultural counseling and consider its implication to this study. Multi-cultural counseling originated in the 1950s in the US in response to a growing diversity in race, culture and language [18]. Since it originated, the multi-cultural counseling movement increasingly advocates for the recognition and consideration of diversity issues including that of culture, language and race in the counseling process [18]. In those early years, issues such as systematic discrimination, prejudice and racial segregation were becoming increasingly prevalent due to social inequality and political policies in the United States.

The history of multi-cultural counseling has been closely linked to these social and political development in the United States, such as the civil rights movement. "The multi-cultural movement in counseling began in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge the cultural bias behind the Eurocentric counseling theories and practice. The movement called attention to forces of racism, discrimination, and prejudice that had caused much injustice in the U.S. mental health delivery system as well as in the larger social and cultural system" [21]. The counseling theories and techniques of the white, European middle-class also did not seem effective when working with clients from minority ethnic cultures, of lower economic statuses, or from non-Western cultures.

Counseling objectives were perceived by some as an attempt to blend clients of color into the white dominant culture. The misery faced by minority groups due to these inequalities then, gradually led to a push for a change in the society, and in the counseling profession as well. Increased studies, publications and formation of professional bodies in the 1960s created greater awareness of the counseling profession in addressing multi-cultural differences, resulting in the development of standards for counseling training and practice requiring counselors' awareness and understanding of clients' environment and diverse life experiences [22]. By the 1990s, multi-cultural counseling became a subject of priority in the counseling profession.

Multi-cultural counseling competency is then defined as "the ability to integrate multi-cultural and culture-specific awareness, knowledge and skills into counseling interaction [8]. The counselor's awareness of their own cultural values and biases is an important aspect of multi-cultural competency. Arrendondo and colleagues identified specific counseling competencies related to the attitudes and beliefs of the culturally competent counselor. They include counselors being self-aware of how and their own cultural background, personal and cultural experiences shape their own values, beliefs, biases and prejudices. Competencies would also include being able to acknowledge their own limitations in multicultural competency and being able to mitigate the socio-cultural differences or misalignment that may arise in the therapeutic process [8].

The concept of multi-cultural competence is connected to inter-cultural interaction where the need to develop an understanding for the culture of others are to be appreciated [23]. From a broader perspective, multi-cultural competence comprise of four different dimensions: skills, cognition, attitudes and action [24]. Multi-cultural competence is not to be learnt by memory, but to be internalized and evident in an individual's attitudes, behaviours and actions.

An inter-culturally competent person understands cultural diversity and is skillfully adept in working with different kinds of people, with different cultures in different situations. They are also capable of making decisions that are not bounded by bias or prejudices, which are not congruent to their values, beliefs, norms and culture. This competence can improve with more experience in working with clients from multi-cultural backgrounds and enhanced communication skills. Through this, the counsellor can learn to look beyond his or her stereotypes, assumptions and discriminations.

In counseling culturally diverse clients, empathy, specifically cultural empathy is extremely pertinent to the therapeutic relationship. Empathy in counseling is described as the counselor's ability to experience the world as the client does, both cognitively and emotionally. When this also takes into consideration dimensions of cultural diversity of the client, it is known as cultural empathy. Ridley and Lingle describe cultural empathy as the counselor's ability to experience and communicate concern for diverse clients in a relatable fashion by going beyond simply understanding cultural knowledge to including emotional understanding specific to the client.

According to Sue and Sue and Arredondo, counselors who wish to use socially and culturally appropriate interventions need to be familiar with theoretical approaches and be able to be culturally sensitivity in their communication with clients [18]. They would also need to design interventions that would cater to the unique needs of clients based on their strengths and weaknesses, be creative and open to the possibility of using interventions that go beyond traditional counseling such as folk healing, and also consider systemic interventions.

Adapting traditional interventions for culturally diverse clients can be as simple as providing some context to the purpose of the intervention or as complex as infusing unique cultural variations. It is important to note that working with diverse clients does not mean discarding all traditional counseling practices but rather, orientating those clients to the interventions and the counseling process and aim [18]. By orientating the clients to the purpose of the session, clients may share insights as to what they feel comfortable with, to help counselors adopt more culturally appropriate interventions that are aligned with their worldviews, cultural values and perceptions.

A major criticism of multicultural competencies is that too much emphasis is given to race and ethnicity, while other dimensions that make up one's personal cultural identity have been either excluded or neglected. In recent years, more authors in the field are arguing for the need to consider a broader definition of culture, to include diversity issues such as gender, ability, religion, age, economic status, sexual orientation and even language [25].

They proposed a more multi-dimensional approach to understanding one's personal cultural identity by including the consideration of diversity issues, social-cultural and contextual, as well as personal identity factors [9,10]. Arthur and Collins notably introduced the model of culture-infused counseling which focuses on building culturally-sensitive working alliance between counselors and client.

Some existing multi-cultural models and limitations

The tripartite model of MCT proposed by Sue, highlighted 3 key components of multicultural counseling competencies categorized as awareness, knowledge and skills [18]. It emphasizes on awareness of the counsellor's own values, biases, stereotypes, prejudices and worldview, as well as the knowledge of client's cultural contexts and cultural identity for more effective therapeutic outcomes in multi-cultural counseling [26]. Sue's racial/cultural identity models which are social identity development models are also useful in understanding and treating culturally diverse clients. This model progresses from dominant culture acceptance to minority culture acceptance. The model has a more complex level where minority culture acceptance is connected to other cultures including the dominant ones [18]. It is important to note that with various dimensions of diversity, a single individual may relate to a few of them simultaneously. The domains are religion and spirituality (R), economic class background (E), sexual identity (S), psychological maturity (P), ethnic and racial identity (E), chronological stage (C), trauma (T), family background (F), unique physical characteristics (U), and geographical location (L). The Addressing framework emphasizes on Age and generational influences, Disability status (developmental and acquired physical/ cognitive/psychological disabilities), Religion and spiritual orientation, Ethnicity, Socioeconomic status, Sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, National origin and Gender.

A significant area that is lacking in both these models is their limitation in understanding client's correlation and interaction with the socio-cultural, political and economic systems around him or her, leading to a less than holistic view of client. It is insufficient to understand one's cultural identity apart from considering how the individual is both interacting, and being shaped by the systems around. The addressing framework is also limited in providing a holistic view by neglecting to consider the impact of family, developmental histories, as well as psychological/emotional aspects of the client.

Counseling theories and limitations

A major criticism of counseling and psychotherapy that have been conceptualized in Western is that these Western theories are based on individualistic western values that do not consider the cultural values, beliefs, norms of other ethnic groups, hindering the effectiveness of counseling". Counseling professionals who use theory and training based on the monocultural perspective often make the assumption that such a theory base can be applicable to all populations" [27].

Most of these traditional counseling models advocate Western values of individualism and independence, which might not sit well with clients from Asian cultures who may highly value collectivism and inter-dependence instead. Another example would be that of the universal feature in psychotherapy of having good relationship with client to enhance therapeutic process. What constitutes good relationship could be very different in different cultures.

Psychodynamic therapy that has its origins in Freudian psychology emphasizes on how one's past may potentially be continually and perpetually affecting one's emotions and behaviours in the present [28]. A significant limitation is that it did not seem to consider how external factors, or factors outside and the surrounding contexts that the individual is embedded in may also be contributing, precipitating or perpetuating the way problems are being manifested and managed in the life of the individual. The lack of consideration of external, contextual and systemic factors may contribute to a limited view of the individual and the associated presenting issues.

The humanistic-existential counseling theories, such as Carl Roger's person-centered approach, takes a more client-centered approach to therapy. Such an approach provides a growth-promoting environment where the client is free and able to discover and change as much as the person wants and needs to. Key therapeutic skills required in person-centered therapy include active listening, empathy, acceptance, genuineness and unconditional positive regard [28]. The client has the best knowledge of how to overcome his or her problems, and is fully capable of changing and growing into what they want to be with the appropriate guidance from the counselor. Essentially, the client requires favorable conditions in which to develop and grow.

Traditional models of counseling tend to treat race/ethnic issues and social/economic as additional factors instead of being intrinsic to the therapeutic process [29]. However, we are all impacted and affected by the society and the systems in which we live in. We cannot treat psychological issues without considering the impact of "widely shared social, cultural and economic assumptions and with the concrete way of life those assumptions generate." What is needed is a contextualized perspective of the dynamics to the problem in which both external and internal factors, personal and social dimensions are considered intricately related and "mutually determinative of each other" [29].

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Due to the nature of multi-cultural counseling it is needful to be attentive to issues related to culture, ethnicity and diversity, it tends to advocate for a more holistic and contextual view of the individual as a product of culture and the socio-political systems that he or she is embedded in. This is significant because the development of one's cultural and ethnic identity has been the influence of many different systems such as the family, the socio-cultural contexts, as well as the political-economic systems that one's is embedded in. When counselor's intervention conflict

with the values and beliefs of the client, it could affect the effectiveness of therapeutic outcome. When the counselor's therapeutic interventions conflict with the VBNC of the client, it could affect the effectiveness of therapeutic outcome. To adopt culturally appropriate interventions which are aligned to client's worldview and VBNC, counselors need to be open to consider other non-traditional means of intervention such as tapping into indigenous cultural and spiritual resources, family& friendship networks, religion, alternative healing methods, in order to provide help that is more aligned to the client's cultural worldview.

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