**A Culturally Open Approach to Training in Pastoral Counseling**

As an immigrant to the United States, I (Schreiber-Pan) was able to take a step back and view the multicultural nature of this country from an outsider’s viewpoint. In my naiveté, I came to this country without a comprehensive understanding of the history of race relations and the depth of conflict between people of various racial backgrounds. It was troubling to accept that my new home was flawed with overt discrimination and systematized racism.

Dr. O’Grady noted above that African American history is American history and contains within it the history of all suffering. As a native-born German, it is part of my heritage to acknowledge the extensive suffering of the Jewish people as a result of my ancestors’ actions. I have had powerful interactions with Jewish community members that can be described as mutually healing. This healing was the result of thoughtful reflection and ownership of one’s individual cultural story. The act of embracing the U.S. as my new home, comprehending the complexity of its multicultural nature, and acknowledging the roots of my heritage prepared me to enter the sacred ground of liminality. I had a significant awakening experience during a diversity class where I gained profound insight into the deeply hidden biases and unconscious projections that affect oppressed minorities on a daily basis. Consequently, these experiences launched my passion for cross-cultural work and prepared me to engage in a number of ways and settings as a fellow sojourner among people from all walks of life. This walk included participating in a teaching assistantship with Dr. O’Grady in the Diversity Issues in Counseling course, a University-sponsored field work trip that Dr. O’Grady and I took to Haiti, and the implementation of special forums on racism, heterosexism, and prejudice for pastoral counseling students aimed at enhancing cross-cultural awareness. This work forced me to explore the liminal space I inhabit. Even today, feelings of unease continue as I settle into my liminal space. Nevertheless, the appreciation of my unique cultural formation story, in addition to an attitude of humility and openness provide safety and a sense of deep groundedness. This groundedness or anchoring provides fuel for the unending work of transformation – transformation of an egalitarian and pluralistic nature. Engaging in the type of transformation described by Turner is an ongoing process that cannot be easily addressed in training through a simple, step-by-step plan. However, in this portion of the chapter, I add to my colleagues’ case study and analysis by distilling experiences from both my personal history and my work as a doctoral candidate at Loyola University Maryland into some clinically relevant guidelines. We wish to offer a few guiding principles intended to foster a more culturally open approach to cross-cultural training for pastoral counselors and other helping professionals. These principles are the result of multiple conversations with pastoral counseling students and faculty, presentations, and research. They are a unique compilation of innovative ideas and expert recommendations targeted toward creating cross-culturally competent counselors. Furthermore, these principles suggest foundational standards that introduce counselors to the essential skills of working with a diverse clientele. The following principles and their accompanying exercises can be viewed as part of the ritual of preparing a pastoral counselor for engagement in the liminal space in such a way that he or she can step into *communitas.*

**Principle 1: Know Thy Own Story and Tell It**

Narrative therapy (White, 2007) is a compelling approach to counseling which places an individual in the expert role of his or her own life. This approach emphasizes the broader context of an individual’s life, paying special attention to a variety of dimensions such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnic heritage, age, and mental and physical abilities and characteristics (White & Epston, 1990). This framework provides a valuable context for counselors to examine their own *cultural* story including assumptions, values, and biases. A meaningful and therapeutically useful exercise is to write one’s cultural formation story. A cultural formation story is similar to writing a life story, but focuses on the cultural underpinnings of one’s personal history. This exercise may provide new meaning for one’s past experiences and generate fresh insights. The following prompts are beneficial when writing one’s cultural formation story:

* What were the most important values in my family of origin and do they still hold true for me today?
* How has my understanding of my cultural heritage evolved over time?
* How did my family of origin address issues of diversity; how did they interact with people of different racial, sexual, or socio-economic backgrounds?
* Were there differences in opinion among family members regarding issues of diversity?
* What are some key (multicultural) experiences I had as a child/adolescent and how have those experiences formed me?
* Did my family of origin show any bias toward a particular group of people (e.g., poor, African American, Asian, LGBTQI, mentally ill, overweight, women, etc.)?
* Were there stereotypical remarks made regarding a specific race (e.g., “Blacks are lazy,” “Mexicans aren’t clean,” “Asians are smarter than other races”)?
* How was my family of origin affected by issues of discrimination, oppression, racism, and stereotyping?
* What was my experience with direct or indirect benefits of individual, institutional or cultural racism?
* How have my experiences with people of diverse backgrounds formed me?
* How have experiences of discrimination, oppression, racism, and stereotyping

benefited or harmed me?

Culturally skilled counselors should strive for a thorough understanding of how their upbringing has influenced their views of others or certain issues. It is essential to reflect on one’s own cultural background and experiences, attitudes, values and biases to ensure a continual experience of self-awareness. Furthermore, in order to become a culturally skilled counselor, one must develop knowledge about his or her multifaceted aspects of self, particularly how this self forms one’s attitudes and biases and shapes one’s counseling approach (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992). An attitude of self-awareness often leads to insight on issues of countertransference, fostering a more effective therapeutic relationship. A central element of successful cross-cultural counseling is the counselor’s awareness of his or her position in the social hierarchy. This includes an honest evaluation of one’s place of privilege, which requires a systematic assessment of societal benefits due to one’s race, gender, physical attributes, sexual orientation, or socio-economic background.

**Principle 2: Become Aware of Cognitive Dissonance**

Cognitive dissonance “describes the state of psychological disequilibrium experienced when we are facing, but have not yet resolved, information that contradicts our worldview” (Newton, 2010, p. 144). In other words, cognitive dissonance leads to feelings of discomfort that result from holding two conflicting beliefs or a conflict between a belief and a behavior. A common experience of cognitive dissonance occurs for counselors in training who reflect on issues of diversity. Most students want to hold the belief that they do not discriminate or engage in racism (Sue, 2001). When a lecture exposes them to the reality of systematized racism or white privilege, it often conflicts with their previously held belief about their ability to refrain from discrimination. The following excerpt, from a pastoral counseling student, describes this sentiment:

In discussing some of the more emotional subjects – heterosexism, racism, and classism – in this class, I realized how much these social constructs have shaped my identity, relationships, behaviors, and beliefs. Consequently, I often felt moments of discomfort. The conflict between my belief and experience created cognitive dissonance. For example, I always thought that I was a pretty independent, progressive thinker who had overcome racism (belief), but discussing white privilege evoked many visceral reactions (emotions). As such, I realized that I still have a long way to go. I also learnt that there are aspects of internalized racism, heterosexism, and classism that I still need to address (Male student, personal communication, May 2013).

Unfortunately, some students who experience cognitive dissonance during their cross cultural training tend to meet issues of diversity with resistance in order to preserve their prior beliefs and to avoid the inherent risks of true transformation. Diversity training highlights issues that are often experienced in direct opposition to one’s worldview. Consequently, students fear disconnection from their communities. The education field has, in recent years, drawn attention to the ways that students encounter dissonance and has developed potential resistance reduction strategies. For example, McFalls and Cobb-Roberts (2001) proposed that creating awareness of cognitive dissonance (i.e. metadissonance) prior to the student experiencing dissonance can help reduce resistance. One hundred twenty-four undergraduate education students were divided into two groups; students in both groups were instructed to read “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh (1989). This article highlights many hidden white privileges and is capable of eliciting cognitive dissonance in the reader. Both groups were directed to engage in a reflective written response to the article, however group two received a lecture on cognitive dissonance theory prior to writing the response. As a result of becoming aware of possible mental discomfort due to dissonance, members of group two showed less resistance to discrepant information than their peers who did not receive the lecture. In other words, when students received information on cognitive dissonance theory and the role of metadissonance prior to reflecting on diversity issues, fewer responses revealed themes of denial, anger, and rejection in response to the article. Therefore, bringing attention to the notion of metadissonance promises to be a beneficial way of reducing resistance and opening oneself to the phases of transformation that are necessary for effective counseling (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001).

**Principle 3: Broaden Your Cultural Horizon**

"To become neighbors is to bridge the gap between people. As long as there is distance between us and we cannot look into one another's eyes, all sorts of false ideas and images arise." *-* Henri Nouwen (2013).

Nouwen’s words highlight the need to encounter people whose lives differ from one’s own. By directly experiencing the *other,* the potential to gain new meaning and broaden one’s cultural horizon grows substantially. With an increasingly diverse population in the United States, an ever more integrated society as interfaith and interracial marriages peak, and unprecedented access to people from various cultural backgrounds, it is more important than ever that pastoral counseling students are able to seek out and leverage cross-cultural experiences for the benefit of personal development and professional effectiveness. Yalom (2002) asserted that the best counseling is the counseling that transforms both the counselor and the client. By stepping into the space of the *other*, we are able to create a new space with our client that allows for authentic discourse in which both the client and the counselor emerge from the experience as something new. Pastoral counselors prepare themselves for transformative experiences with all clients by exposing themselves to diverse populations and experiences. The counselor must soften his or her edges so he or she does not merely observe the experience, but rather truly engages in the experiences of the *other*.

Efforts to broaden one’s cultural horizon should not only involve the professional domain, but should also include settings of a personal and social nature. For example, joining a community meeting with a racially diverse population helps the counselor gain another perspective aside from the experience she encounters at her or his academic or clinical institutions (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992). The following list provides suggestions for ways to broaden one’s cultural horizon:

* Attend a worship service at a religious community that differs from your own.
* Attend a Buddhist meditation group.
* Attend an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or other support group meeting.
* Seek out people of different racial or socio-economic backgrounds at work, school or church and initiate a conversation.
* Serve at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter.
* Visit a LGBT community center.
* View and discuss the educational documentary film *Color of Fear* (Lee, Hunter, Goss & Bock, 1997).
* Volunteer at an immigrant or refugee community organization.
* Participate in a mission trip or study abroad.

Exposure and engagement are essential for counselor’s professional and personal self development as they provide experiential, hands-on encounters. Such encounters have the potential to facilitate understanding and familiarity with people and situations that previously have been thought of as foreign, perplexing, or even inferior. An authentic cross-cultural experience is a fundamental ingredient of professional competency.

**Principle 4: Practice Cultural Humility**

As pastoral counselors and pastoral counselors-in-training, it may be helpful to reinforce that the strength of cross-cultural competency is defined by the openness one has toward the *other* (Fowers & Davidov, 2006)*.* Moreover, openness integrates the interpersonal dimension of humility, a trait that is a characteristic of respect for others and a lack of self-focus. Therefore, a cultural humility approach advocates for self-evaluation and awareness that one’s own culture is not superior to other cultures. Educating counselors-in-training to become culturally humble requires critical thinking skills in addition to continuous reflections on cross-cultural experiences (Schuessler, Wilder & Byrd, 2012). Cultural humility challenges an individual’s sense of superiority that often arises when one is confronted with cultural differences. Therefore, an attitude of cultural humility is a way of being that is *other*-oriented. The preceding guiding principles in this section describe elements of cross-cultural competence; however, cultural humility proposes that such feelings of competence can lead to overconfidence and failure to notice the complexity and uniqueness of the clients’ culture and experience (Hook, Davis Owen, Worthington & Utsey, 2013). Therefore, it is vital that counselors maintain an attitude of cultural humility and commit to its lifelong development. The following list of objectives may be helpful for counselors to reflect on when considering a viewpoint of cultural humility:

* Promote an interpersonal stance of openness rather than superiority.
* Reflect on cross-cultural experiences through dialogue or journaling.
* Trust in the value of self-reflection and self-critique.
* Become aware of one’s own cultural lens through which one perceives the client.
* Take an open stance toward others, recognizing one’s ability to learn from all clients.
* Become less authoritative and more collaborative, less of an expert and more of a learner.
* Understand one’s own prejudices and biases.
* Readily enter into the client’s world.
* Acknowledge one’s limited knowledge and understanding of the client’s cultural background and experiences.

The primary focus of cross-cultural training for pastoral counselors is awareness, knowledge, and self-reflection. Developing cultural competence requires knowing oneself and actively processing consequential insights. Furthermore, it requires heightened awareness of personal cognitive dissonance when confronted with conflicting beliefs. Experiential encounters with cultures different from one’s own are essential when gaining multicultural counseling skills. Finally, it is indispensable that counselors cultivate an attitude of cultural humility; culturally humble counselors approach their clinical work through a lens of persistent openness, self-critique, and lifelong learning.

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