



# Cross-Cultural Issues in Contemporary Counselling Practice: African Experience

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## ABSTRACT

The issues of cross-cultural therapy permeates into different aspects of human lives, hence bringing to the fore implications for counseling psychology practice in different parts of the world including the African continent with different countries, people, cultures and values. It has come to play significant role in the entire gamut of therapeutic work in different parts of the international community. In this paper, attempt, however, is made to discuss concepts of culture, race and identify cross-cultural therapeutic relationship to portray the realities of cross-cultural counseling and debunk inherent challenges relating to some stereotypes. The therapeutic goals, mode of communication between the therapists and the client, drawing home the issues of choice, perspectives of understanding based on cultural variations are equally explored with reference to socio-cultural milieu of other parts of the world in general and Nigeria in particular. Procedures to facilitate and making improvements are proffered, which includes cultural studies, effective communication and adequate knowledge of counseling theories and approaches.

**Keywords:** Cross-culture, Race, Identity, Therapy.

## INTRODUCTION

Counseling psychology as a growing profession, especially in this part of the world, (Africa), undoubtedly, is receiving much attention. With this growing interest in this field of psychology, both developed and developing countries the world over seem to exert enormous concerns and attention to this discipline of helping. As a human service profession, the scope expands and attention is being paid to not only the production of individuals to serve as

counseling psychologists to handle the many areas and working environments for counseling and counselors.

In today's International Community, cross-cultural issues filter into all aspects of our lives and inevitably have a significant role to play in therapeutic work. The whole area of cross-cultural counseling psychology has been investigated significantly less than other areas of counseling psychology<sup>1</sup>.

It is observed that there is growing number of therapists from diverse cultural and racial groups. Nonetheless, many more are still being required. This is because the entire world experiences dynamism, which goes also with advancement in many areas. Similarly, in different parts of the globe, there exist historical antecedents which bring people together, with differed cultural orientations. Other reasons includes increased transportation, communication, migration, pleasure trips, wars and many more of reasons to acquire knowledge or seek for employment. In the Western world, especially, the movement as well as settlement of people of different cultural background makes them experience problems which require more scientific and professional help for desired solutions.

It is worthy of note that in some developed countries where counseling psychology has fairly long history, some centres came on board to cater for ethnic minorities seeking support for example, in United Kingdom. Such centres as the Intercultural Therapy Centre, called NAFSIYAT; the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture (Both based in North London) have shown that people of many and diverse cultures need some appropriate therapeutic support. According to <sup>1</sup>, counseling organizations such as the British Association for Counseling's subdivision, RACE (Race and cultural Education in Counseling) and a special interest group on race and culture within clinical psychology, formed in 1990s.

It is of interest that numerous academic journals, such as the American publications entitled: the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology and Multicultural Counseling and Development; and the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, address critical issues relating to cross-cultural counseling.

Evidences about that increasing number of books are being published every year in cross-cultural work. One major reason for the huge expansion of literature in the cross-cultural field about the world has been a result of misdiagnose, largely owing to the misunderstanding of cultural factors and existing racism. Much more is still required in order to really being to understand the impact of race and culture in clinical practice. The generally held view that if you have trained in one theoretical framework you can work with people from all cultures, is yet to hold water, and thus being challenged. There is no doubt that cultural issues cut across every approach of therapeutic work. In most African countries, particularly Nigeria, there exist myriad of cultures with inter face between languages and peoples and peoples attitudes and values.

Observed that, "Whether in teaching, counseling or mentoring, cross-cultural implies interacting or interfacing across cultural lines".<sup>2</sup> It means providing a service to someone from another cultural background. He posits that should there be a different approach when working with someone from another culture. Can a counselors, teacher or mentor be effective with someone culturally different from him/her? Or perhaps, a more pertinent question is, what will it take for effective cross-cultural counseling to occur given the typical presumption woven into the fabric of most countries' institutional disciplines.

To show the distinction of cultures<sup>2</sup> further gave the many forms of culture that exist. Male cultures, female cultures, Southern cultures, Eastern cultures, Urban cultures, Rural Cultures, Adolescent cultures, Adult cultures Popular cultures and mainstream cultures. He noted that, "When counseling people of colour, one should consider four areas: the stage of racial identify formation of his/her client, the

economic class of the client, the political and social history of the client's ethnic group, and his/her own identity, history, biases, judgements, and class as a counselor". All these can affect the counseling relationship. The practicing counselor needs to be kept abreast. He/she can move, stay and work in different cultures as well as people of varied orientations. In many locations, particularly urban and semi-urban towns and centres, the counselor has special tasks and likely to encounter unprecedented challenges and problems.

It is also opined that one approach to use in cross-cultural counseling is the racial identity development (R/CID) model. Racial identity development models argue that the identity development stage of a client can determine what method of racial identity in their lives. The stages range from a stage of rejection of one's own culture while embracing middle class white American culture to a stage of nationalistic glorification of one's own culture while totally rejecting middle class white America. Although, this model applies more to a different cultural environment, it may well be applicable to the African cultural context.

Racial identity development model, proposes a four stages of racial identity development process for Africans<sup>2</sup>. His four stages described as: passive-acceptance, active-resistance, re-direction and internalization, correspond to Cross' pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion and internalization stages respectively.

A competent cross-cultural counselor understands the importance of the R/CID model in counseling situations. A person of colour at the conformity stage might prefer a white counselor as opposed to one of his/her ethnic group due to the rejection of his/her culture<sup>3</sup>. The white counselor's responsibility, in this case, is to determine whether or not he is making progress with

his client or if his client is complying in order to please or gain the approval of the white counselor. On the other hand, a person of colour in the Resistance and Immersion stage would prefer a counselor of his/her ethnic group. In the African context, the ethnicity, religion, sectional background and values acquired from the limbo of African counselor. The Nigerian counselors experience such situation due to enhanced transportation and employment status.

### **Cross-Cultural psychology**

The field of cross-cultural psychology compares concepts and events between different cultures, based on the premise that there is one inherent universal aspect across cultures. An example of cross cultural psychology research might be to take a concept such as adolescence and to explore it across cultures.

### **Race, Culture and Identify**

The concept 'race' is generally used to refer to unchangeable characteristics such as skin colour, hair, eye colour, facial characteristics, which are shared by a group of people who have the same ancestral origins. It does not refer to genetic differences between races. Many people in Nigeria hold to this view, it is equally true that some societies are racist and prejudiced e.g. South African; and this impact greatly on the psyche of the people ethnic minority groups in Africa continue to face discrimination, social, political, educational and economic disadvantage. Some clients often complain of racism and culture-blindness. The counseling psychologist needs to take responsibility to address this with the clients, who are often unsure whether it is safe enough to do so. Hence, it often emerges in unconscious ways or disguised ways<sup>4</sup>.

It is observed that race is often extended to include cultural elements,

implying that somehow people's behaviour or values are rigid and unchangeable. Not only during war period, among people of the same race there is strong prejudice and even torture due to cultural factors such religion or political beliefs, these differences become perceived, like race, as 'unbridgeable'. Although, race and culture are often used interchangeably, culture is here defined as something psychosocial and therefore changeable.

Culture is defined by<sup>1</sup> to mean, 'A way of creating shared ways of functioning in order to communicate effectively. we create shared events, practices, roles, values, myths, rules, beliefs, habits, symbols, illusions and realities'. Culture includes the visible aspects, such as dress code as well as all the invisible aspects such as the way we relate, think and even 'Culturally appropriate' ways of expressing emotions. Culture is such a part of us that it becomes incredibly difficult to convey. In fact clients can often feel a sense of being overwhelmed when they have to try to do this in counseling psychology. This is because much of what constitutes culture is around us, we are part of it and require it, but it is not directly observable. The individual and culture have a dynamic relationship. This can change through time and with the arrival of new-comers or people returning to their culture after exposure to new cultures and ways of living. Therefore, it is always the relationship that we are interested in, not just the culture or only the individual. If we concentrated on the culture we would be in danger of viewing the person within a stereotypical box and likewise, if we concentrated on the self only we would be trying to understand a person without a context. In other words, we would not be viewing the whole, only parts of it. At all times, the relationship between the triad that is the person, the familial system and the cultural context needs to be considered. If

this framework can be kept in mind, it will enable the counseling psychologist to keep a balance between the different aspects which contribute to people's way of being.

The distinction between various cultures is usually made in relation to dramatic and obvious differences, but of course there are endless, often marked distinctions. These can be observed in everyday behaviours, for example the way of relating to others such as patterns of greeting, comfortable distance when in conversation with others, child rearing values dependence and independence and all, the ways one interacts with one's social community. The challenge of cross cultural work is to have the sensitivity and the ability to enter a different world, or at least its significant components and not only understand it, but feel comfortable to challenge it.

Racial and cultural factors, together, form what we call our identity or the way we define ourselves psychologically and socially, in terms of our sense of belongingness or rootedness. Although, there is a level of constancy in terms of identity, it is not formed through adherence to one single culture.

State that: *Culture's complexity is illustrated by the hundreds or perhaps even thousands of culturally learned identities, affiliations and roles we each assume at one time or another. Culture is dynamic as each one of these alternative cultural identities replaces another in salience*<sup>5,1</sup>.

Since, it is a constellation of more than one culture, the counseling psychologist has to be aware of which is the client's salient cultural identity, depending on the cultural framework at the time, the idea of multiple identities is increasingly supported by client accounts and research. Ethnic minorities define their identity through the images and expectations of their own culture, but also how they are perceived

by the majority culture. If the cultural context and its influences are ignored, and indeed if the cross-cultural relationship is not mentioned, it dilutes the richness of the direct and therapist relationship.

### **Working off Challenging Stereotypes**

In order to improve effectiveness, working cross-culturally means raising and challenging awareness of some of the commonly held stereotypes around race and culture such as: -

1. The distinction between 'them' and 'us'. This is a strong dividing line which affects practice and performance.
2. Hierarchies people are categorized and live on hierarchy ladder.
3. Negative images people tend to hold, some of which are negative.
4. Client seen as the racial/cultural group
5. Suitability for therapy.

All the stereotypes result from our anxieties about working with difference and an often rather ethnocentric view of the world. Ethnos is the Greek word for 'nation', and the last part comes from 'centre', meaning that one's own group is the centre of what is the norm and correct, furthermore, there is the hierarchical judgement that one's group is superior, since what is carries represents the norm. Shifting ethnocentrism means reflecting on our behaviour, but challenging them can take place only with the right type of facilitation within a safe context. Although, in today's international community, cross-cultural interaction is inevitable, it can result in extremely powerful dynamics, rightly in the following ways.

1. It can significantly raise people's anxiety and increase defensiveness.
2. Raised anxiety can influence people's clarity of thinking and inability to understand others' behaviour as well as to have insight into their own.

As a result, people often do not reflect on their behaviour and simply do not understand how behaviours vary cross-culturally. In fact, sometimes issues of difference, namely racism, are so difficult to understand or to relate to that if they have not had personal experience; people may choose to become emotionally detached from them. Another way of coping may be to feel that they are so unreal and overwhelming that one cannot take on board societal issues. Cross-cultural interactions can create these extremely complicated dynamics when people lose their familiar framework and do not feel safe.

The counseling psychologist does not need to have information about all cultures-indeed; this would be an impossible task. The cross-cultural therapeutic process is about finding a way to work with the similarities and differences at the same time. There needs to be enough openness to challenge one's views and to consider diverse value systems.

### **Goals of cross-cultural counseling psychology**

#### **The goals include**

1. To have a clear awareness and challenge our ethnocentrism and any stereotypes evoked when coming into contact with other cultural groups.
2. To take into account the role of race and culture (s) in the client's life.
3. To explore the client's relationship with the majority culture
4. To understand their choice of therapist and the meaning it holds.
5. To be open to how the client presents their culture, rather than the societal or media images of the culture.
6. To have some understanding of the client's journey, voluntary or involuntary, to the new culture.

### **Communication in cross-cultural counseling**

It is observed that a large of cross-cultural work involves an awareness of cultural variation in non-verbal and verbal communication. In terms of the non-verbal aspects, for example, there are differences in the 'desirable' spatial distance across cultures, including the ideal conversational distance. In terms of kinetics, it has been found that people can decode body behaviour and facial expression more accurately when it is exhibited by those who share a common language, culture and race. Paralanguage, which involves tone, loudness of voice, pauses, hesitations, pitch and rate of speech also differs across cultures. Similarly, it has been found that paralanguage is easier to comprehend by those who belong to the same culture.

Paralanguage, kinetics and proxemics are so much part of everyday communication that they can provide stronger message than the verbal. If the therapist is attentive they can provide stronger messages than the verbal. If the therapist is attentive they can pick up a great deal of information from the body language of the client. Non-verbal behaviour is more unconscious, hence more primitive, than words' therefore it can be more revealing than the verbal.

In all therapeutic work, we need some awareness of the client's historical background. Recalling something which was experienced at a younger age may be extremely difficult, especially if it is the first time it is being talked about and in another language. Generally, it is unrealistic to expect the counseling psychologist to find out exactly what the client would have said in their mother tongue. However, there may be times when meanings become too unclear owing to language difficulties. It may be important to pause and ask the client to think/say the words in their own language.

Cross-cultural communication may require a great deal of explanation, needing to be made more explicit, than if people shared a cultural background with the other. Where there are language barriers it may mean that therapeutic work can only remain at a particular level and not progress. Using another language than one's 'Mother tongue' in psychotherapy is complicated and can be a help or become a hindrance to the client, depending on the meaning attached to it.

To some extent, language barriers can also be overcome when working with interpreters. This is particularly useful if one is working with young children who are not fully aware of all the socio-political facts.

### **Therapeutic relationship in cross-cultural counseling**

To build good therapeutic relationship, this needs time to develop and seeking help from a stranger is not to be underestimated. However, the added component of speaking to a stranger who belongs to a different culture/race needs careful consideration during the initial meeting. The therapist can gain sight into the reasons why they need support at that particular time of their life.

Counseling psychology is believed to be a delicate process because clients have to be understood within their culture context. However, inquiry about cultural issues should not be the focus, unless it is the problem itself. a client can sense how the cultural information is asked and why? Counseling psychologists need to be clear that they are able to work with particular issues and certain cultural groups. This is because conscious and unconscious meanings and assumptions, such as strongly held religious or political beliefs, will be communication to the client. This is where cross-cultural training, supervision and personal development are crucial. If a

therapist has not explored is or her own prejudices and feelings about certain cultural groups and practices, then this can result in distancing the client and intensifying feelings of difference.

Anyone engaged in cross-cultural work would need to have some familiarity with the socio-cultural context of our clients. Cross-cultural clients may fall into one of the following categories: -

1. First generation immigrant
2. Second or more generation immigrant
3. Refugee
4. Student
5. Temporary worker
6. Traveler/tourist

Each group will bring their own issues and these need to be understood in order to separate what is internal in the client and what is external (and perhaps) group experience and probably out of the client's control. For example, working with refugees, the counseling psychologist needs to have some sense of what it is like to be persecuted to flee and to experience severe loss.

### **Choosing a Therapist Based on Race or Culture**

In counseling and psychology, debates have been going on as to whether there should be racial matching of client and therapist. All clients have ideas on who they feel they can trust to work with this can be discussed from the beginning of the counseling psychology relationship when anxieties are heightened. The client's qualitative accounts and hence preference reflects more accurately who they think (and trust) would support them best.

### **Understanding life stages across cultures**

The area of life stages has an interesting field to explore cross-culturally. In this context, the concept of life stages is not used to mean strict guidelines on what is

supposed to happen at each stage, but some idea of what cultures/communities expectations may be of their members, we know that expectations about development vary enormously across cultures.<sup>6</sup>

### **Cross-Cultural counseling and the Nigerian experience**

Counseling psychology may be said to be fairly new in Nigeria situation. However, it is fast gaining ground and has since been recognized as one of the strong helping professions. A careful look at the prevailing situation in Nigeria reveals that there is fast influx of people from different parts of the world. This could be attributed to improved transportation and communication. Some other reasons could be for education and other social concerns. Tourists and other settlers came with many and diverse cultures. In the face of their many and different problems, personal and in grounds, they require help and support. Hence, the need for cross-cultural counseling, with all these concerns, there is still dearth of counselors, especially those particularly groomed to handle cross-cultural issues.

In the light of the above, concerted efforts need to be made to properly design and articulate cross-cultural counseling psychology. Mass movement of people and services are on the increase daily, racial and cultural infusion are more discernible, hence the need to improve and include cross-cultural therapeutic process because cross-cultural issues filter into all aspects of our lives and inevitably have a significant role to play in therapeutic work, albeit not adequately investigated from the Nigerian perspective.

### **CONCLUSION**

The key reasons why cross-cultural issues need to be taken on board by counseling psychologists have been

expounded. Although, the cross-cultural work process is relatively new territory for counseling psychologists, there has been more thinking about the issues, particularly in the Nigerian context.

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