

Ethnic Minority Counselors as Cultural Brokers: Using the Self as an Instrument to Bridge the Gap

Josephine M. Kim

The multicultural movement accentuates the ability of counselors from one culture being able to efficiently work with clients of other cultures. A strong emphasis has been on counselors of the majority culture and their proficiency to cross cultural boundaries to facilitate productive sessions for ethnic minority clients. While it has been a much needed emphasis due to the majority of counselors being Caucasian, it is time to extend a shift of paradigm in expectations to ethnic minority counselors, especially those who are bicultural.

Bicultural counselors possess a unique advantage when working with matching ethnic clientele: they can advocate for clients and families of their own cultural group in ways that others cannot. There exists a great responsibility which must be shouldered by ethnic minority counselors to act as cultural brokers between the majority culture and their own minority culture. However, there is no emphasis on this responsibility nor a systematic pedagogy that addresses teaching ethnic minority counselors ways in which they can use their unique position to promote mental health among people of their same culture. Consequently, counselors from ethnic backgrounds who are bicultural are not fully utilizing the resources available to them to foster mental health among their own people.

As a cultural broker, the ethnic minority counselor can use the self as an instrument by (1) endorsing the utilization of counseling services, (2) modeling health, and (3) developing other bicultural counselors. These methods are ways in which the field can move beyond the textbook knowledge of multiculturalism while implementing practical measures to reach often unreachable populations.

Endorsing the Utilization of Counseling Services

Self-Advertisement

A bicultural counselor can be a safe resource for information concerning counseling services; however,

the surrounding community often is unaware of the existence of bicultural counselors. Bicultural counselors should actively advertise and promote their biculturalism both formally and informally. A bicultural counselor who is bilingual ought to include this vital information in bulletins, phone books, and business cards as a way to distinguish him- or herself from other counselors.

Ethnic minorities often do not begin seeking help with the recognition that they have certain emotional symptoms, but rather this recognition emerges during the course of help-seeking through conversations outside of the family such as with friends, coworkers, neighbors, and acquaintances of their same culture. For individuals with emotional distress, this lay referral network system plays an important role in pathways to mental health care. Often it is in this lay help-seeking network that understanding of emotional disorders are formulated and discussed. One must recognize that information about professional sources of help easily filters to minority populations through such informal networks. Therefore, asking family, friends, and local churches and businesses to spread the word about the availability of a bicultural and/or bilingual counselor in the area will begin this process of informal networking. If this channel of information is used as the main resource to encourage help-seeking behaviors, then service utilization among ethnic minorities may increase.

Ethnic minority groups in general have knowledge deficits regarding resources that are available to them, including mental health services. Knowledge acquisition on the nonstigmatizing nature of counseling and its focus on situational problems of everyday life may encourage utilization rates. Endorsing information about the various types and modalities of services, the role of a counselor, and the assurance of client confidentiality may promote a positive outlook on counseling as a viable coping resource.

Psychoeducation

Counselors have other roles which are quite distinct from the remedial nature of counseling; it is their involvement in educational programs that target prevention. The effectiveness of preventative and educational modalities of counseling are just as essential if not more crucial than remedial counseling interventions. There is wisdom in starting prevention programs as early as possible, because this investment could reduce the burden of suffering and even lessen the financial costs related to future development of prolonged problems.

Major archival studies show that both language and ethnic match between counselor and client are predictors of length and outcome of counseling treatment. Based on this premise, it can be said that psychoeducation provided by a counselor of matching ethnicity will be persuasive and dynamic when heard by matching clientele. Many immigrant groups value themselves as more civilized than any other people, and they frequently dismiss other races as being inferior. Assistance offered by nonethnic people may be perceived as inappropriate or even controlling and demeaning. Given the mistrust of mental health providers which often exists amongst minority populations, the ethnic minority counselor can take on the role of a cultural broker between counselors of the majority culture and their own minority population through psychoeducation.

An ethnic minority counselor can destigmatize the profession of counseling, gaining the trust of those who belong to the same minority group and changing their perceptions of counseling. He or she can use his or her bilingual and bicultural skills to endorse counseling in a way that is culture specific and appropriate. A bicultural/bilingual counselor can teach about culture-bound vulnerabilities that place a given minority population at risk for various emotional distresses while spreading information regarding professional counseling, including benefits of receiving help versus the consequences of delaying assistance. He or she also can educate about the multiculturalism movement as it relates to a particular minority population.

This culture-specific focus creates an educational channel that can be used to orient specific populations to aspects of mental health that pertain exclusively to them, increasing their consciousness of mental health issues that they would not otherwise have an initiative to explore. A spectrum of psychological matters should be presented to a targeted group of people, addressing mental health issues that are acutely specific to that cohort. Cultural specificity ensures the dissemination of information on the culture-bound vulnerabilities that place specific populations at risk for various emotional

distresses; this full knowledge of risk factors is a necessary prerequisite for primary and secondary interventions. Thus, without a clear acknowledgement of such risk factors, it is unlikely that one would seek professional counseling services, let alone benefit from primary and secondary interventions.

Modeling Health

Biculturalism

A bilingual, bicultural minority counselor who has not only experienced the culture-bound vulnerabilities and risk factors of that specific culture on a personal level but has also provided mental health services to both his or her own ethnic population, as well as to the general public, can serve as a role model. Such a counselor gives the clients a sense of hope, because the clients can perceive that it is possible to successfully cope with these risk factors. Immigrants bring with them their own indigenous patterns and conceptions of mental illness, some of which can only be identified and recognized by a counselor of the same ethnic group. Fully aware of these factors, a bicultural counselor can assist clients to attain biculturalism in lieu of their cultural background and experiences.

Many counselors have learned to be bicultural and can help clients become so as well by passing on their understanding of how to retain community traditions while entering and succeeding in the majority society. In guiding youths, counselors can draw on positive and negative aspects of their past experiences, reflecting on the sources of their own success. Minority populations often lament the scarcity of positive role models in their communities, and counselors can fill this void.

Positive Coping Strategies

Bicultural counselors can use their personal stories to instill hope and to model appropriate and productive coping strategies. Ethnic minority counselors can play a key role in helping their clients feel confident and safe in their neighborhoods, learn alternatives to violence, gain educational experiences, and acquire the bicultural skills needed for success in school and in society by sharing a common language and similar family history with clients. Bicultural counselors can normalize acculturative stress and symptoms related to the acculturation process, especially regarding intergenerational conflicts. Informing clients of the universality of the issue often brings hope and relief.

In times of rapid cultural change, parents do not know all their children need to learn to survive and flourish, so sources of guidance must be found beyond the family. Through community-based programs, and

neighborhoods, links across generations can be forged. These loosely knit networks can also foster new generations of leadership with the cultural skills that today's children need to succeed in an increasingly diverse world. The counselor can use his or her personal stories as a parallel process and case example to present practical methods of brokering among these multifaceted cultural gaps.

Developing Other Bicultural Counselors

More education and prevention efforts need to be made by bicultural counselors who are currently in the field, while shouldering the responsibility of recruiting and training future ethnic counselors.

Recruiting

Bicultural counselors should make the recruitment of future ethnic counselors their responsibility. They should promote the counseling career, and identify people who possess counselor-like qualities. They should actively participate in career centers and engage in career-oriented seminars, proactively making the profession known to the people of their own ethnic group. Presenting the need and the benefits of bicultural counselors, as well as the existing opportunities for growth and development, will serve to demystify the profession and instill a sense of responsibility. One should clearly identify the steps needed to be taken in order to become a counselor in a certain state, being careful to answer questions that may arise regarding the field.

Training

Bicultural counselors who have been working as cultural brokers should pass on their well-learned knowledge to the incoming generation of counselors. As a counselor educator and as an active member of counseling associations, a bicultural counselor should make it his or her priority to train future counselors in ways in which they, too, can use their biculturalism and their own personal experiences to become a cultural broker. They should help to instill a shared sense of responsibility for their own cultural group, training future counselors on how to promote health and well-being in their own culture.

A stereotypical assumption that an ethnic minority counselor is automatically an expert in multicultural issues prevents counselors of various ethnic backgrounds from further developing this edge to serve the profession and their own people. This long-standing myth also prevents counselor educators from utilizing pedagogical material that enhances growth in ethnic minority counselors. However, this responsibility

cannot be fulfilled unless a minority counselor is taught techniques and skills in using one's personal culture-centered experiences as an instrument to bridge the gap between the majority culture and one's ethnic culture. There is power in shared experiences, and using one's own personal culture-centered experience as an instrument allows one to advocate, empower, and foster change in families of one's own ethnic group in a way that is nonstigmatizing and nonthreatening.

Conclusion

A bicultural counselor can endorse counseling services through self-advertisement and psycho-education. He or she also can model health by modeling biculturalism and the productive coping strategies that allowed him or her to advance this far in society and in life. Finally, a bicultural counselor must uphold the responsibility of developing future counselors within his or her own ethnic group, being careful to recruit and train them for the purpose of reaching others in their own culture.