Lesson Proper for Week 10

COMMUNICATING IN YOUR INTERNSHIP (CONT.)

An overview

Human service professionals and their clients are becoming increasingly cross-cultural, that is, the client is often from one cultural background and the worker from another. Such relationships can present special challenges for the human service professional because the worker and client are likely to bring very different assumptions, values, beliefs, and communication patterns to the helping relationship.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), the population of the United States is rapidly becoming older and ever more diverse. Based on projections from the 2010 census, minorities will constitute the majority of the U.S. population for the first time by 2043. No single group will constitute a majority then, but non-Hispanic Whites are projected to be the largest single group. The total minority population is expected to double by 2060, growing from its current 37 percent of the U.S. population to a projected 57 percent. (“Minorities” in this analysis consist of all those not among the single-race, non-Hispanic White population.) The total minority population is expected to double by 2060 from 116.2 million to 241.3 million. Hispanics are expected to more than double in number, Asians are expected to double, American Indians and Native Islanders will increase by 50 percent, and Blacks will grow slightly in number increasing from 13 percent to 14 percent of the population. In addition, increasing numbers of U.S. citizens identify themselves as “mixed race.” By 2050, this group is expected to triple. In contrast the White population is expected to diminish in numbers after peaking in 2024, declining by 20.9 million people by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Projections also suggest that by 2060 more than half of all children in the country will be from minority groups with the most dramatic increases among the Latino population. These dramatic demographic shifts are occurring due to differential birthrates and immigration patterns among the various population groups (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008).

In addition to racial and ethnic diversity, significant demographic shifts are also occurring in terms of age. By 2050, one-fifth of the population is expected to be 65 or older. In 2056 the older population (age 65 and over) is projected to outnumber the young (age under 18) for the first time in the history of the country (U.S. Census, 2013b). The older population will continue to be for the most part White, while younger segments of the population will increasingly be minorities. Even so, the elderly too will become increasingly diverse over time with Whites representing only 63 percent of the elderly in 2050 as compared to 82 percent in 2005 (Passal & Cohn, 2008). The group often referred to as the "old-old," meaning those 85 years of age and older, is expected to more than triple between 2008 and 2050 (Bernstein & Edwards, 2008). Partly as a result of this trend, human service professionals are also more likely in the future to work with individuals with disabilities, as this group too is expected to grow as life expectancies increase. Disabilities, of course, affect every age group, ranging from 14.9 percent among children under 5 years of age to 52.9 percent among adults over 75 (Mackelprang, 2008).

Religious diversity in the United States adds another dimension to cross-cultural relationships between professionals and clients. Most countries rank higher in religious diversity as compared to the United States, but there is considerable diversity represented among the various forms of Christianity represented within the U.S. population (Pew Research, 2011). Yet Pew Research (2013) found that "the United States is on the verge of becoming a minority Protestant country; the number of Americans who report that they are members of Protestant denominations now stands at barely 51%" (para. 4). Human service professionals are increasingly likely to work with people who are Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim. The number of Muslims in the United States is expected to more than double by 2030, largely due to immigration and fertility rates among Muslims, making their numbers by then roughly equivalent to those of Jews or Episcopalians today (Pew Research, 2011). Also, a growing segment of the population reports "none" as their religious affiliation. This group includes those who define their spirituality outside the context of any traditional religion or faith as well as those who report being agnostic or atheist (Cooperman & Lipka, 2014).

Additionally, diversity is increasing in the United States around issues of gender and sexual orientation. A growing number of people identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, but it is difficult to determine the percentage of the population who represent these categories due to traditional cultural taboos that have made it difficult for these individuals to self-identify. The number of identified gay households in the United States increased by 30 percent between 2000 and 2005. The U.S. Census (2013a) reports that approximately 1 percent of U.S. households are same-sex couples and that these rates vary considerably by state with .29 percent in Wyoming and 4.1 percent in Washington, DC. Currently 35 states recognize same-sex marriage and rates of same-sex households are expected to increase as cultural attitudes shift toward greater acceptance of this trend (Pew Research, 2014). Based on data from the American Community Survey, estimates are that 8.8 million people in the United States are gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Gates, 2006). The Sloan Work and Family and Research Network (2007) reports that 0.25–1 percent of the U.S. population self-identify as transsexual and that a much higher percentage of transgendered people are believed to be present in the population. Transgender is a broader term than transsexual, applying to people who express a sense of their own gender as different from their birth sex. Currently there are greater numbers of people who identify as gay or lesbian as compared to those who identify as bisexual or transgender. As social views related to sexual orientation and gender identification become more accepting, there will no doubt be greater numbers of people who will feel safe in self-identifying in all of these categories.

Finally, an important aspect of diversity in the United States is socioeconomic class. Despite the myth that the United States is a classless society, growing income and wealth inequality in the county over the past several decades is well-documented trend (U.S. Census, 2010). Significant power differentials and cultural differences exist between those of greater and lesser financial means (Newton, 2014; Keller, 2005; Loomis, 2005; Newman & Lennon, 2004). These common cultural differences involve many of the same factors that frequently differ among ethnic or racial groups such as housing patterns, education levels, family patterns, religious beliefs and affiliations, forms of recreation, and views of the world. It seems likely, in fact, that this is one of the most common forms of cultural difference that human service professionals encounter. Human service professionals, by virtue of education, professional status, and income, often occupy a different socioeconomic class than do the clients they serve. This in itself can present significant cross-cultural challenges to productive work within these relationships.

This chapter's approach is consistent with this idea because it encourages you to think about issues of human difference more broadly, considering not only ethnicity and race but also age, gender, sexual orientation, rural/urban/suburban locale, socioeconomic, privilege status, and ability status, among other factors. As you work to sharpen your diversity skills during your internship, it may therefore be useful for you to think in terms of both cultural differences and human differences more broadly as they apply to both yourself and others in all of your helping relationships.

Understanding Concepts Related to Diversity

Culture has been defined as the "knowledge, language, values, customs, and material objects that are passed from person to person and from generation to generation in a human group or society" (Kendall, 2013, p. 628). Cultural characteristics include such variables as language and communication patterns (both verbal and nonverbal), attitudes, norms, relationship and kinship patterns, religious beliefs, help-seeking behavior, and more. The profound impact that culture has on us typically operates outside our awareness, shaping not only how we behave but also how we think and what we perceive (and don't perceive) in our environments. For individuals within a given environment or group, acquiring the characteristics of that culture is generally adaptive, helping them to cope and meet their needs within that particular social setting. Culture can be a useful concept in understanding not only ethnic differences but also the more commonly experienced differences associated with gender (Canon & Singh, 2014; Bricker-Jenkins & Lockett, 1995), socioeconomic class (Newton, 2014; Schlesinger & Devore, 1995), and other categories of human difference.

Closely related to the concept of culture is that of ethnicity. Ethnic groups may be defined as a particular type of cultural group—that is, "a collection of people distinguished, by others or by themselves, primarily on the basis of cultural or nationality characteristics" (Kendall, 2013, p. 629). People within a given ethnic group generally perceive themselves, or are perceived by others, as sharing a common history and/or ancestry. Some experts also point out that the term is often used to denote a group of people who maintain a shared culture within an environment in which a different culture is dominant. Thus, Anglo-Americans, even though constituting a cultural group, would not be seen as an ethnic group in the United States due to their dominance within the larger culture.

Another important concept to keep in mind as you learn about and work with diverse populations is “minority groups.” A minority group, sometimes referred to as a subordinate group, may be defined as “a group whose members, because of physical or cultural characteristics, are disadvantaged and subjected to unequal treatment by the dominant group and who regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination” (Kendall, 2013, p. 281). This definition implies that minority group’s stand in contrast to “dominant groups.” A dominant group is one that “is advantaged and has superior resources and rights in society” (Kendall, 2013, p. 281). As these definitions suggest, minority group status is based on a group’s relative lack of power in relation to the dominant group(s) within the larger society. Minority status, therefore, is not a reflection of a group’s size but of its relative power. Therefore, women, because they hold collectively less power and fewer resources in society as compared to men, might be considered a minority group, even though they comprise roughly half the population.

Although it is helpful to understand these fundamental concepts related to culture, preparing yourself to work effectively with diverse populations obviously requires far more than this. To become capable of working with diverse groups effectively, practitioners must engage in the intentional building of competence and skills in cross-cultural helping and navigating a host of human differences. Some basic competencies include gaining knowledge of various cultures and a wide range of human difference through study and direct experience, developing a greater awareness of your own cultural make-up, understanding the human differences that you yourself embody, decreasing your ethnocentrism, and increasing your respect of other traditions, perspectives, and worldviews (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Diller, 2007). Also, some writers suggest that effective cross-cultural helpers can benefit from understanding biculturalism as a potential coping skill for clients who are struggling to adapt within cultures different from their own (Chen, Benet-Martinez, & Bond, 2008; Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008). Finally, human service professionals must not only know and understand these concepts, but they must be able to apply them effectively and skillfully in actual practice situations. This chapter will guide you in developing some of these skills as you think about issues of diversity related to your fieldwork experience.

Increasing your Knowledge of Multiple Cultures

As you work with people from varied backgrounds, it is sometimes difficult to sort out those characteristics that are cultural traits as compared to those that are individual traits. Within all cultures, there is a wide range of individual diversity. Groups that might superficially seem to be homogeneous are often surprisingly diverse. Hispanic or Latino people, for example, may appear to have similar backgrounds, but this is in fact a very diverse group. Latinos have cultural roots in Cuba, Mexico, South America, Central America, Spain, or Puerto Rico. Each of these groups constitutes a distinct subgroup within the broader Latino ethnic group, and each has its own unique history and cultural identity (Garcia, 2011; Villalba, 2014).

To assume that all people within a given cultural group are alike or even similar is to stereotype. Although stereotyping must be avoided, general information about a client’s cultural identity is often useful. You cannot and should not assume that your clients conform to characteristics that are frequently found within their culture, but having a general knowledge of their culture will help prepare you to understand perspectives and worldviews that might be different from your own. Having a better understanding of a client’s culture enables you to work with them

in a more sensitive manner and can help you to understand the origins of certain behaviors that you might otherwise misinterpret. For these reasons, human service professionals have a responsibility to learn about the cultures that their clients represent.

Out of your increased understanding of the culture, you will be better prepared to recognize culturally relevant behaviors as well as individual differences among your clients. Most important, you will be better equipped to develop helping relationships with your clients built upon acceptance of who they are and understanding of their cultural context. No matter how much you learn about cultural difference, clients themselves are indispensable sources of information about themselves and their cultures. Listening to clients with flexibility of thought and an attitude of genuine interest, openness, and respect are the most important skills required to overcome cultural barriers in your relationships with them. Not only will this approach facilitate the development of productive cross-cultural relationships, your cultural knowledge and skills will grow exponentially as well.

As you read about various cultures and interact with clients from different cultural backgrounds, look for the strengths and assets within each culture. In many human services settings, it is easy to become focused exclusively on needs and deficiencies. This orientation may cause you to overlook the resourcefulness, resiliency, strengths, and capabilities that are part of each culture. Recognizing cultural assets will help you to avoid negative stereotyping, especially toward groups typically thought of as “disadvantaged” (Saleeby, 2006).

In addition to focusing on strengths, it is useful to focus on the similarities and commonalities between yourself and those clients who, on the surface, seem to be quite different from you. Although cultural competence involves focusing on cultural differences, it is essential not to lose sight of those universal human qualities that transcend culture as well. Developing cultural competence means that you develop the ability to recognize and empathize with universal human feelings, needs, and desires, despite the cultural barriers and challenges that various relationships might present. Understanding how these universal qualities tend to be expressed within different cultures will help you recognize these qualities more readily in cross-cultural relationships. Recognizing the commonalities between you and the people you serve will enable you to relate more genuinely, empathically, and effectively with clients from all backgrounds.

Gaining Awareness of your own Culture

All of us see the world through the lens of our own unique cultures and personal experiences, although most of the time we are not aware of this lens. Becoming aware of the lenses through which you view the world is one of the most significant, and most difficult, aspects of working effectively with those who are different from you. In developing competence as a cross-cultural helper, direct experiences with people from cultures other than your own is necessary, not only because it enables you to learn about different cultures but also because it enables you to learn about your own culture and become more aware of your own cultural make-up.

In fact, awareness of your own cultural make-up is often *best* developed through direct experience with people different from yourself. One of the benefits of interacting with people of different cultural backgrounds is that it heightens your awareness of contrasts in attitudes and behaviors. Much of your cultural learning likely occurred so early in your development that it exists outside your awareness. Therefore, unless you experience cultural contrasts, you are likely to take your own culture for granted, seeing it as what is “right” or “natural,” particularly if

you are from the dominant or White culture. The importance of gaining cultural awareness through interacting with contrasting cultures, however, is not limited to the dominant cultural group. According to Axelson (1993, p. 32), "a Black person in the presence of a group composed mostly of White members might be more aware of his or her Black ethnicity than in a group composed mostly of Black members." Whatever your culture, when you have spent your life fully immersed in it, it becomes like the air you breathe—all-important but outside your awareness. Contrasts in cultures and significant human differences are defining features of many human service internships, yielding powerful learning opportunities and heightened self-awareness for students.

Decreasing Ethnocentrism

The first steps in developing cross-cultural competence are learning about other cultures and becoming aware of your own cultural background, biases, stereotypes, and values. Through these initial steps, you have developed an understanding that cultural traits are simply learned behaviors. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to see one's own culture as "right," "normal," or "natural" and other cultures as "wrong," "abnormal," or "unnatural." This tendency is called *ethnocentrism*. Ethnocentrism occurs when one assumes that one's own culture sets the standard against which other cultures should be evaluated, that one's own cultural patterns are best and right (Kendall, 2013).

In order to work effectively with people from different cultures, human service professionals must strive to overcome ethnocentrism. By examining their assumptions and reactions as they interact with people very different from themselves, professionals can become more aware of their ethnocentric reactions. Most, if not all, human service professionals have had thoughts and feelings in the course of their work that have brought them face to face with their own ethnocentrism. Ethnocentric reactions might be experienced as feelings of rejection, judgmental thoughts or feelings, or a sense of shock or even disgust in reaction to a client's behavior, attitudes, values, or lifestyle. These can be difficult experiences, especially for people who generally see themselves as accepting and nonjudgmental. As you examine your assumptions and biases, it is helpful to be a part of a trusting and respectful environment in which you can feel safe taking risks and discussing these issues with others, such as classmates, faculty members, and supervisors (Lee & Greene, 2004; Snyder, Peeler, & May, 2008). Your field seminar might provide a good forum for these kinds of discussions.

Recognizing ethnocentrism in ourselves can be challenging, just as it is challenging at times to recognize our own cultural make-up. Each person's cultural lens acts as a powerful filter on perceptions, causing each of us to pick up on certain things in our environment while remaining oblivious to others. This lens also colors how we interpret what we observe, assigning meanings that may or may not be accurate or appropriate to the reality of the situation. The following example illustrates how different cultural lenses operated to give two students very different perceptions of and reactions to the same field setting. Each of their reactions might be considered an ethnocentric response.

A high degree of self-awareness, maturity, and openness to personal growth is required to reduce ethnocentrism and become more accepting of other ways of being. In fact, several aspects of self-actualization identified by Maslow (1954) reflect the types of developmental shifts that are integral to overcoming ethnocentrism. Among other traits, Maslow describes the ideal, healthy, fully functioning person as one who is more accepting of

self and others, more perceptive of reality, more independent of culture and environment, more resistant to cultural influences, and more capable of transcending cultural bias. All of these traits, according to Maslow, are central to achieving the highest levels of personal growth and development. Interestingly, these same traits will help you become more effective as a human service professional as well, enabling you to work more sensitively with culturally diverse groups.

As you strive to overcome ethnocentrism and develop respect for different cultures, it is helpful to remember the adaptive nature of culture for people in a given environment. It may be instructive to ask yourself, "How might this particular characteristic have helped this individual to thrive, cope, or survive within the environment in which he or she has lived?" Especially challenging for human service professionals is the fact that at times their clients are hampered by their culturally learned behaviors. Although certain behaviors are adaptive and desirable within their own environments, the client may experience distress in other situations because these same behaviors violate the norms of the dominant culture, creating conflict or stress. The client then is in the confusing situation in which a behavior that is constructive and positive in one setting is counterproductive in another setting.

For example, the dominant Anglo culture of the United States places a high value on punctuality. One manifestation of this cultural value is that businesses and professional offices generally operate on a system of precise schedules. Some cultures, for example, traditional Appalachian mountain culture and other informal, rural, collectivist communities, manage time far more flexibly (Axelson, 1999). Individuals from such cultures may experience severe disapproval if they bring these habits regarding time into the typical American workplace. Such situations, often referred to as *culture clashes*, can seriously affect an individual's ability to experience satisfaction and success within a different culture. An individual's ability to hold a job and meet his or her own survival needs might be significantly hampered in this situation.

Understanding Biculturalism as an Adaptive Mechanism

As our environment becomes more culturally diverse, human service professionals must often help clients cope with culturally challenging situations in their own lives. The worker's role in these situations is, as in all helping encounters, to help the client explore and understand the nature of their difficulty and identify ways that it might be resolved. Some clients in such situations can feel quite threatened because they fear that they are being asked to give up their own cultural identity in order to be successful. Other clients may discount the value of their own culture and see it only as an obstacle to be overcome if they are to be successful. The notion of biculturalism is sometimes helpful to people in these situations.

Biculturalism occurs when an individual is able to adapt his or her own behavior to a particular culture as needed while retaining his or her primary cultural identity. The fully bicultural person is able to shift successfully back and forth between cultures, experiencing gratification of needs within, as well as making contributions to, both worlds (Chen, Benet-Martinez & Bond, 2008; Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008).

The major benefit of biculturalism as a coping strategy is that it respects clients' allegiance to and identification with their primary culture, recognizing the value of the primary culture to their identity and ability to cope within that social environment. At the same time, biculturalism allows room for clients to adapt to another culture as necessary in order to meet their needs within that environment as well. Within the framework of biculturalism, clients can experience success in new or different cultures while maintaining their primary cultural identity.

Although this adaptation process might require a good bit of effort and energy, it tends to be less stressful than the alternatives of giving up the primary culture altogether or experiencing repeated frustrations and difficulties within the different cultural setting. The following case example illustrates such a situation.

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