# Cultural Issues in Counseling: An International Perspective

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**Abstract**
The advancement of a more global perspective in counseling field during the past two decades has been facilitated by the awareness of ethnocentric biases of counseling theory and practice, which originate in the United States but are assumed to be universally acceptable. Although there have been an increasing effort to understand the role of culture in counseling practice, little research has been conducted specifically on international population outside the United States. The need to attend multicultural diversity of clients is more obvious when counselors and clients have different cultural backgrounds. Realizing the importance of this issue, the authors of this paper will discuss the challenges and the professional needs of counselors, particularly in Malaysia, who usually rely on counseling theories that originated in United States, but work with clients who are culturally different than in United States population. Some of the significant multicultural issues faced by counselors and counselor educators in Malaysia will also be included in the discussion.

**Introduction**

A major assumption for culturally sensitive counseling is that counselors can acknowledge their own tendencies and the limit of their cultures on other people. Thus, is essential for counselors to understand their cultures and their worldviews before helping and assisting other people. According to Padilla, Boxley, and Wagner (1973), there, is increasing evidence that the trained counselor is not prepared to deal with individuals who are culturally different from them. Although Padilla et al's writing was published more than 20 years ago, the idea is still applicable to current situation. Cultural sensitivity remains as one of the important characteristics of effective counseling. Padilla et al's writing also shows that one of the characteristics of an effective counselor is the ability to recognize diversity and cultural differences. It is undeniable that the need to attend multicultural diversity of clients is more obvious when counselors and clients have different cultural backgrounds. According to Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, and Trimble (2002), multicultural awareness is no longer considered as a special emphasis, instead as a generic competence in counseling across cultures. Recognizing the importance of cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity, more authors and researchers who focus their work on multicultural counseling have emphasized the importance of counselors demonstrating multicultural competence in working with diverse population (Constantine, Ladany, Inman, & Ponterotto, 1996). However, it is important to note here that since most counseling literature stems from research on White Euro-Americans middle class, the standard to determine mentally healthy or unhealthy is based from their cultural perspectives. Recognizing the importance of multicultural awareness in counseling, the authors of this paper will discuss some of the key issues in multicultural counseling. The discussion will be divided into four sections: (1) Understanding Socio-political Factors in Counseling; (2) Will Western Model Benefit international Population; (3) Challenges Faced by Counselors in Malaysia; (4) Recommendations and Conclusions.

**Understanding Socio-Political Factors in Counseling**

In the United States, minority people usually refer to ethnic minorities, gays, lesbians, transgender, bisexuals, and women. When counseling is internationalized and becomes a more global field, minority people can also be referred to any people in other countries whose culture is different than White American culture.

The move to multicultural awareness requires counselors to understand the impact of socio-political factors that affect minorities whether they are in the United States or in other countries. Why? Counseling should not forget the context where people live and the political structure that affects people live (Santos, Ferreira & Chaves, 2001; Sue & Sue, 2003) because understanding sociopolitical factors help counselors to offer effective interventions from their clients' cultural context. Counselors must realize that the mental health practice is influenced by historical and current sociopolitical contexts that have an impact on variety of issues, such as race, culture, and ethnicity.  Sociopolitical dynamics not only influence the worldview of clients but also the worldview of counselors (Sue & Sue, 2003). Ibrahim (1991) noted that "because worldviews are culturally based variables, they influence the relationship between a helper and a client" (p. 14), which in turn may interfere with counselors' effectiveness in perceiving and interpreting clients'

problems.  For instance, in the United States, institutional racism has created barriers between White Americans and people of color. Over the last 500 years people of color, especially African Americans, have endured a pattern of state-sanctioned violence, and civil and human rights abuse and have been the victims of systematic public and spontaneous private violence since the slave trade and the colonial conquest of the Americas. Arab Americans is another misunderstood ethnic group in the United States (Erikson & Al-Timimi, 2001). Many Arab Americans perceive the U.S political and economical relationships as taking sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Furthermore, the political instability in their home countries may have caused them to have cautious and apprehensive worldview especially towards Western people. They may refuse to speak openly about their problem and do not feel comfortable in expressing their view. In addition to that, negative stereotyping towards minority people may lead them to perceive Euro-American counselors with mistrust and suspicious.  Sue and Sue (2003) noted by not revealing their true feelings, they prevent counselors from knowing their thinking, which may protect them from being offended and exploited.

Understanding sociopolitical dynamics also help counselor to avoid misdiagnosis and mistaken assumptions towards clients. Because of common myths and misconceptions towards diverse populations, Euro-American model of counseling is seen as superior and applicable across culture. As highlighted by Sue and Sue (2003), White Euro-American cultures are considered as not only desirable, but normative as well. A culturally competent counselor must realize that what is regarded as good in one culture may be seen as maladaptive in other cultures. In some countries like China and Russia, individual differences, freedom of choice, self-determination, and using one's own potential data at some points are prohibited and considered as politically incorrect.  Therapeutic helps have also been politically motivated and oppressive (Leung, Guo, & Lam, 2000; O'Neil, 1992).  To protect their own safety, those who grew up in such countries may lack of verbal expression and open communication, which may lead counselor to have mistaken assumptions towards their clients. Clients may be seen as uncooperative, dependent, and unable to communicate. European- American counselors or Russian counselors who received their training in the West must be particularly aware that Western counseling approaches are not applicable in a society where individual beliefs and needs are deemphasized.

Another important reason why it is crucial for counselors to understand socio political impact in counseling is to avoid doing harm on clients and ensure that they provide effective service to client. Since counseling occurs in a cultural context, the meaning of counseling and the role of counselors may vary across cultures. Minority people may lack of confidence in the counseling process conducted by Euro-American counselors as a result of racial oppression.  In some countries which were colonized by Western powers in the past, Western model that emphasizes on individual choice may be seen as an attempt to impose Western standard and way of life on less powerful group and an attack to traditional values. While the separation between religion and science is clearly stated in the West, religious and moral teachings are embedded in many areas, such as political, legislative, educational, and helping profession. In such countries, counselors are morally

obligated to help clients make a choice that are not against moral and religious teachings. The pressure to accept Western values and reject their own may be seen as another form of oppression (and colonization) whose role is to force assimilation and acculturation (Sue & Sue, 2003). Counselors who wish to avoid doing harm in the counseling process must consider the potential effects of sociopolitical dynamics. Increased awareness of these sociopolitical dynamics allows counselors to view counseling from a broader and deeper perspective, which in turn help them to render appropriate services for their clients

**Will Western Model Benefit International Population?**
With the growing recognition of cultural diversity, it is important to look whether international population would or would not benefit from the counseling models that were developed mostly in and for Western population. Our view is that Western models of counseling would only benefit international population with some cultural adaptation and accommodation. In addition to that, counseling researchers must begin to develop theoretical models that suite to international population.

Why counseling in the Western sense will never take place in other societies whose culture is different than Western culture? Simple importation of Western models of counseling models with expectations of similar results may never happen due to cultural differences. In discussing the limitations of career counseling Gybers, Heppner, and Johnson (1998) noted that the field of counseling has been founded largely on a framework of European American culture that plays a big role in influencing theory, research, and practice. Two tenets of European American culture that dominate counseling literature and may limit its adaptability to international populations are individualism and autonomy and ethnocentrism.

The importance of individuals is obvious in counseling theories as well as counseling interventions. To ensure that individuals perform their developmental tasks successfully, they are supposed to separate themselves from their family. As a result, Western counseling or therapy literature often ignores the role of the family that may play a significant role in other cultures. Even some family counseling approaches also emphasize on individuality. For instance, family of origin therapy (Bowen, 1974) and structural therapy (Minuchin, 1978) propose differentiation of the self from the attachment figures and open and direct communication among family members. Role and boundaries are supposed to be clear so that young adults can leave home and achieve independence. Enmeshment is described as unhealthy because it leads to closeness and dependency. What is viewed as healthy and adaptive behaviors in Western culture may be viewed as harmful to the family systems in other cultures. In collectivist groups, preserving family harmony is possibly more important than fulfilling personal desires. Roles and rules are often unchangeable. Verbal expressiveness and direct communication are less commonly seen. For instance, in Latino and Asian Americans families, the need to respect and follow family desires is more important than fulfilling individual interests (Brown, 2004). In Muslim families, preservation of family ties and collectivist behavior come before individualistic orientation and behavior (Daneshpour, 1998). In these minority groups, when an individual is individuated from the support network, he or she

may create a problem to the system because one's self-image is usually determined on the basis of his relationship with the family (Daneshpour, 1998). In other words, preserving family harmony is much more important than fulfilling individuals' needs. As a result, individuals may not choose a career that fits her personality if they found that the choice is not approved by the family.

The second tenet is ethnocentrism. In an article entitled "Counseling in an international context", Pederson and Leong (1997) noted that is a human tendency natural in every nation including the United States. US models of counseling generally are based on the works of US researchers and the models generally are more adaptable to White population (Corey, 2008). Many researchers have agreed that counseling as traditionally practiced in the United States might lead to dangerous outcomes (Geistein & Egisdottir, 2005). Geistein and Egisdottir pointed out some examples of the way counselors communicate with clients (one-on-one, personal distance, give giving, and battering) that are considered ethical in US but might be perceived negatively by people from other cultures who take great pride in their own unique cultures. Some counseling interventions that use tests and instruments also are not culturally sensitive. For instance, career tests that are used widely in career counseling. Fouad and Bingham (1995) noted that the DISCOVER, the well-known computerized career information system has no question that examine the role of family in career decision-making. Vocational Preference Inventory (VPI) developed by Holland is another example of career test that is not culturally sensitive to non-White. In testing the cross-cultural validity of Holland's theory in India, Leong, Austin, Sekaran, and Komaraju (1998) used the Vocational Preference Inventory (VPI) and found that the caste system plays an important role in vocational interest. The authors found that the VPI could not be adapted directly to Indian people because the caste system is highly integrated in their career choice. In this case, vocational interest based on European model of career counseling is challenged. Many of the participants would not complete the VPI as in the original version because the instrument listed some occupations that were considered too low for their caste. To address this cultural issue, the authors changed the wording of the instruments and included a category of occupations that considered too low status for them to consider. Even with the modifications, the study concluded that the findings did not support the reliability, external, and predictive validity of the VPI to Indians. The assumptions underlying the theoretical framework of Western career theories that individuals who work hard will be able to make any occupational dream a reality is also violated in the former Soviet Union (Skorikov & Vondracek (1993). In the former Soviet system, career development of employees was influenced by nationality, gender, Communist Party membership, and personal relationship. An inverse relationship existed between job performance and satisfaction. The better an employee performs his work, the lower his job satisfaction. This was the case because the system of career management was set up against people who strive to achieve their occupational dreams. Even though some instruments have been proven to work well and adaptable in other cultures, the fact remains that they were originally developed for Western population. Similar to potential problems of employing US models of counseling interventions is the use of a US diagnostics system, the American Psychiatric Association's (1994) Diagnostics and

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Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder-IV (DSM-IV), which are used widely in Malaysia especially by psychiatrists.

Based on the discussion presented in this section about the potential hazard of adopting US models, it is important for counseling professionals across the globe to be aware of the issue. Why international populations would not benefit from Western counseling models? Individuals cannot be separated from their society and the cultural context in where they were born and raised. Sue and Sue (2002) noted that individuals who share the same cultural matrix would exhibit similar values and beliefs systems. These values and beliefs systems will then influence their worldviews. A broader view of counseling development must not ignore the different world views and cultural values. We cannot simply develop a counseling model that can be used by all individuals without taking into account the cultural context.

**Challenges faced by Counselors in Malaysia**
Malaysia is a culturally and religiously diverse country with about 26.26 million people consisting of 65.1% Malays and other indigenous groups, 26% Chinese, and 7.7% Indians (Malaysian Department of Statistic, 2005). As revealed in the Malaysian Population and Housing Census 2000, religion is also highly correlated with ethnicity. Most Malays are Muslims; most Chinese are Buddhists; and most Indians are Hindu. Being a multi-religious nation, Malaysia also has a fair share of those embracing other religions, such as Christianity, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2005). In East Malaysia, many of the indigenous people are Christians, although traditional beliefs are also widely practiced. Because of its cultural mix, many Malaysians are multilingual. Many can speak at least two languages; Malay as a first language and English as a second language. Other languages used by Malaysians include Chinese and Tamil.

Like many other Asian societies, Malaysian is also a collectivist society, which emphasizes the values of group over the individual. Although each ethnic group has its own cultural traditions and community structures, their cultures have blended together as a result of socialization. For instance, many elements of the Indian culture have been adopted into the Malay culture. The most obvious example is the Malay marriage ceremony, which was adopted from Indian marriage ceremony. The "*bersanding*" ceremony, which the bride and his groom wear special dress and seat on the bridal couch that has been decorated was adopted from Indian culture. The couple is treated as royalty. The Malays have also adopted a Chinese custom of giving "*ang pow*" or money gift wrapped in colored envelopes to children during "*Syawal*", which is a celebration held to commemorate the completion of the fasting month of "*Ramadhan*".

\The Malays are the majority and they make up more than half (65%) of the population (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2005). Most of the Malays are Muslims. Under the Malaysian Federal Constitution, the term "Malay" is defined as a person who practices Malay culture and professes the religion of Islam, speaks Malay language, and whose ancestors are Malay (Wikipedia, 2006).

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The Chinese constitute about 26% of the population. Most of them are descendents of Chinese immigrants who arrived between the 17th and 19th century. The Chinese are a mixture of Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, and Christians. Some Malaysian Chinese speak English as their first language although the majority of them are Chinese speaking (Wikipedia, 2006)

The Indians are the third largest ethnic group, which form about 7.7% of the population. The majority of Indians descended from those who migrated from South India during the British colonization. Most Indians speak Tamil as a first language. Approximately, 80% of Indians identify themselves as Hindus (Wikipedia, 2006) while the others are Muslims or Christians (Storz, 1999).

The oldest inhabitants of Malaysia are the indigenous groups, who mostly reside in East Malaysia, and the aborigines of the Peninsular Malaysia. The groups account for about 5% of the population. These groups generally share a strong spiritual tie to the rainforest (Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, 2006). There are more than 95 different indigenous and aboriginal groups, each with their own cultural identity.

Despite the diversity, Malaysia is a harmonious county with multiracial groups living together. However, like many multiracial society, Malaysia also faces some issues related to multicultural even though racial tension is rarely voiced. Counselors and counseling faculty may face some significant multicultural issues as an impact of these sociopolitical dynamics. They may inevitably encounter client populations that differ from themselves. Such situation may no create a problem if they understand that all behaviors are learned and displayed in a cultural context. However, it is important to note here that Malaysians' perspective towards counseling or mental health service is different than Western people's perspective. The stigma towards mental health problem is very much prevailing among the general population regardless of their educational backgrounds (Crabtree & Chong, 2000; Kumaraswamy, 2001). Since the independence from the British colony in 1957, the country only recorded one race riot that happened on May 13, 1969, involving majority people who are Malays and minority Chinese, who were considered immigrants. In 1971, the government announced that racial sensitive issues were not openly discussed under any circumstances. The government also introduced many policies that aim to unite the country. On the surface, Malaysia is a harmonious county with multiracial groups living together. Racial tension is rarely voiced. However, this does not mean that racial and cultural issues have been solved. Considering this issue, what are some of the challenges that counselors and counselor educators in Malaysia may face?

These sociopolitical dynamics are challenges for counselors and counselor educators in Malaysian universities. Perhaps the biggest challenge or issue for counselor educators is to have honest and open discussions on multicultural issues, even in the Multicultural Counseling class because such discussion is not encouraged to avoid racial tension. Usually, the discussions are kept at the surface level. For some counselor educators who had exposure to multicultural issues during their training in Western countries, they

realize the importance of such discussions, but they may feel uncomfortable to have open discussions. It may also be difficult to discuss multicultural issues with some counselors and counselor educators, who never been exposed to open racial discussions. Majority people may refuse to discuss racial issues because they do not want their privileges as a majority to be challenged. On the other hand, minority people may also refuse to talk about it openly to avoid racial conflicts. As noted by Sue and Sue (2003), prejudice and suspicious among races may discourage people to have an honest discussion. Sue and Sue also emphasized that minority people will feel more vulnerable in discussions that lead to self-disclosure. It is also a challenge to make some people understand that racial or group privileges may become a big barrier in counseling relationship. If people from different races have open and honest discussions regarding privileges of certain groups, they may better understanding of themselves and other people, which is crucial in developing a healthy helping relationship.

The second issue is to apply counseling theory, techniques, and interventions to diverse populations. Many Malays who are mostly Muslims are suspicious towards anything that is originated in Western countries after being colonized by British for nearly three decades. Western countries are often labeled as evil and are trying to undermine their cultural traditions. Even though counseling has been redeveloped in the Malaysian context to incorporate aspects of Malaysian culture (Pope, Musa, Singaravelu, Bringaze, & Russell et al, 2002), there has been little effort to promote the importance of understanding religious diversity in counseling. Pope, et al (2002) highlighted that for the Malays, religion is very important and guides all of their decisions throughout their lives. Unfortunately, many counselor educators have lack of training in multicultural issues and were more exposed to Euro-American counseling theory, research, and practice as they are written and practiced in the United States. The challenge for counselor educators is to deconstruct counseling in a cultural context by modify the traditional counseling approach to a more effective and accurate cross-cultural approach. The incorporation of religion and spirituality into counseling is one of the possible ways to tackle this issue.

Because there is a very little room to discuss racial issues during the training and the unawareness of multicultural counseling, the impact of sociopolitical dynamics in counseling may be not be well understood and recognized by student counselors. As mentioned previously, lack of understanding of sociopolitical dynamics may limit counselors' ability to better understand the worldviews of clients from other cultural backgrounds and cause misconceptions and misdiagnosis. Whether counselors realize or not, they may do harm to clients rather than help them finding the best way to face their problems. In conclusion, counselor educators working in a multiracial society are inevitably encounter client populations that differ from themselves.  Such situation may no create a problem if they understand that all behaviors are learned and displayed in a cultural context. Understanding political dynamics is vital to successful multicultural competence.

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**Recommendations and Conclusions**

One of the important questions that we would like to highlight is whether counseling should be internationalized? Many counseling researchers have agreed on internationalizing counseling. However, in the application of cross cultural models, researchers and practitioners must be particularly aware that assumptions of cultural identity cannot be based solely on the country of origin (Hesketh & Rounds, 1995). Migration and international adoption may change the individuals' cultural values and they adopt the new culture. Thus, it is critical for counselors to take into account individual differences within the cultural context. By acknowledging individual difference, counselors can ensure that any modification or accommodation of career theories and development is sensitive to diverse needs of individuals.

A broader view of counseling theory is the one who is developed from the perspective of particular populations and is used for those populations. It is unethical to examine an individual's development from a Eurocentric approach because the results may show that he or she does not perform stage-appropriate developmental tasks. Culturally sensitive counselors must acknowledge the danger of stereotyping and the need to respect cultural diversity. It is impossible to develop a new theory that can be applied for all people, but it is possible to develop a broader view of career theories and development through modification and accommodation of the existing theories or develop a new one that is more culturally appropriate. To do so, future researchers are recommended to (1) try to identify which components of specific theories are universal and which one which may need to change; (2) gather more information about the national and cultural characteristics of the research participants; (3) test theories in cultures other than where they were originally developed; (4) participate in multinational and multicultural research teams; (5) study literatures from other countries; and (6) visit foreign countries and experience first hand differences that exist. By considering these six recommendations, researchers not only widen their global view, but also help in enriching the literature with a more useful and meaningful framework of counseling development.

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