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Promoting International Counseling Identity: The Role of Collaboration, Research, and Training

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Learning to become an effective counselor and counselor educator requires extensive professional and personal preparation. Both new and seasoned professional counselors must challenge personal values and beliefs, understand foundations of professional counseling, and learn how individual clients nationally and internationally are affected by the rapidly changing society. In the 21st century, a critical step in the development of professional counseling involves creating an identity that embraces globalization. This article reviews three emerging themes related to counselor identity internationally: collaboration, research, and training.

International Counseling Identity

Over the past century, the definition and foundation for professional identity of counselors within the United States has been a topic of substantial debate. Professional organizations such as the American Counseling Association (ACA), the Council for Accreditation of Counseling Related Educational Programs (CACREP), the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), and the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) have helped promote identity, define the scope of practice, and lobby for the roles and functions of professional counselors throughout the United States. Weinrach, Thomas, and Chan (2001) described professional identity as a core set of values, attitudes, and beliefs, a shared worldview, and unique behaviors that differ from other professions. Other researchers have examined a constellation of core values which describe professional counseling as oriented toward: health and wellness (Myers, 1992); prevention and education (Kleist & White, 1997; Lanning, 1990); guidance and humanism (Neukrug, 2003); normal human growth and development (Gale & Austin,

2003); multiculturalism (Sue & Arredondo, 1992); and social justice and advocacy (ACA, 2008).

As professional counseling continues to grow, increased emphasis has been placed on the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for professional counselors. Increasingly, members of the profession have engaged in multicultural and trans-cultural counseling experiences, working with a variety of clients across multiple diversity dimensions. With advancements in technology and increased emphasis on globalization, individuals and groups worldwide are more easily able to communicate and work collaboratively. Consequently, opportunities to engage in counseling and social advocacy around the world are now possible.

Professional counselors have recognized the importance of engaging in international counseling activities through direct and indirect service provision, with attention to education and advocacy (Chung, 2005; Savickas, 2003). Furthermore, international counseling organizations have sponsored international counseling conferences, promoted collaborative research, and developed educational opportunities between counselors and other helping professionals (International Association for Counseling, 2008).

Through experiences both in the United States and abroad, research on international counseling, and a review of salient literature, the authors have identified an emerging professional identity and role for counselors and counselor educators working within the global context. The foundation is the concept of developing a professional identity for counselors on a global scale, or an “international counseling identity.” This new identity does not diminish or replace the current professional counselor identity, but rather fosters new dimensions of service provision. Professionals within the counseling community who may be interested in developing a stronger professional counseling identity with an international perspective may include: counselors-in-training, counselors in various practice settings, and counselor educators. A primary goal for establishing an internationally grounded counselor identity is to help establish a comprehensive counselor education curriculum which includes a global component. Additionally, traditional and non-traditional modalities for learning should emphasize multicultural and trans-cultural competencies, increasing global awareness, and ways globalization influences counseling practice.

The development of an international counseling identity involves three key components: collaboration, research, and training. Each helps foster strong professional practice and collectively they work to enhance the counseling profession internationally.

Collaboration

Today’s counselors have many opportunities to collaborate worldwide and help promote the profession of counseling on a global scale. Creating meaningful and sustainable collaborative relationships is a critical component of success. Therefore, counselors interested in developing an international counseling identity may want to begin through outreach in a specific country that they have regular opportunities to visit. Collaboration is founded on establishing and maintaining strong professional

relationships, so counselors should expect that working with counseling professionals from other countries will involve a multi-year process. Three recommendations for counselors collaborating with international colleagues include avoiding colonialism, working from a multidisciplinary perspective, and promoting active organizational involvement.

Although collaboration is considered a vital part of developing an international counseling identity, counselors should refrain from adopting a colonial approach. Western culture has been criticized for promoting ego-and ethnocentric strategies and for emphasizing simplistic notions of right and wrong without attention to relevant cultural variables. Adherence to colonialism promotes the “myth of the Western expert” and may unnecessarily create power differentials (Chung, 2005). Increasing personal awareness and identifying internal and external biases and stereotypes of the identified culture is imperative before beginning collaborative processes. An understanding of cultural systems before entry will also assist in the process of self evaluation of potential ideological conflicts. Through collaboration, counselors will learn about socio-political and cultural influences in the specific country and then be better able to work with other helping professionals in promoting the development of counseling.

As part of international collaborations, counselors need to engage with other practitioners who identify themselves as working in the helping professions (e.g., social work, psychology, education, medicine). Because the profession of counseling has been largely a development in the United States, finding practitioners who identify themselves as professional counselors in other countries may be difficult. For instance, in 2006 the Australian government attempted to recognize the profession of counseling and establish official credentialing (Pelling & Sullivan, 2006). In New Delhi, India, helping professionals identifying themselves as school counselors may in fact have training in social work, teacher education, psychiatry, or psychology (Hoskins & Astramovich, 2008). Furthermore, the 2005 publication *Mental Health Atlas* by the World Health Organization (WHO) did not identify counselors as one of the helping professionals providing mental health services. Professional counseling as defined within the United States does not exist in the same form in most other countries. Thus, U.S. trained professional counselors wanting to collaborate in other countries will likely need to work with allied helping professionals.

Finally, involvement in professional organizations can help counselors increase awareness and provide a framework for international collaboration. Many counseling organizations have helped create avenues for the counseling profession internationally, including The International Association for Counseling (IAC), National Board for Certified Counselors International (NBCC-I), and CACREP. The IAC (2008) hosts annual conferences and maintains a peer reviewed journal that published research on counseling from an international perspective. A division of the National Board of Certified Counselors, the NBCC-I was created in 2003 with the goal of promoting the counseling profession internationally (NBCC-I, 2008). Both NBCC-I and CACREP have actively created training opportunities and sponsored conferences for those interested in the counseling profession internationally. Counselors seeking to collaborate with professionals in other countries can utilize these organizations as a means for increasing

their knowledge and for networking with other helping professionals who have an interest in the promotion of counseling internationally.

Research

Research can be a powerful resource building tool in the development or enhancement of counseling services. Counselors working internationally must acknowledge that research-based interventions are culturally influenced. Studying counseling in other countries requires researchers to focus on culturally relevant interventions and to avoid the assumption that Western counseling approaches will be as effective or appropriate for use in other areas of the world. Reviewing current literature, choosing a line of research inquiry, and deciding on appropriate methodology are important steps to advancing counseling research internationally.

Professionals promoting the development of an international counseling identity should immerse themselves in research that addresses international counseling. Many international counseling organizations have their own research dissemination venues or journals. In addition, many U.S. based counseling journals have periodically provided a special issue dedicated to international counseling. Seeking out scholarship within the country or region of interest is also recommended. Reference librarians at local universities and colleges can aid in requesting resources from other countries. As counselors become more knowledgeable about the current status of counseling research internationally, they may aspire to conduct their own studies to help advance the profession.

International counseling research may involve exploration, replication, or the development of evidence-based practices. Exploratory research may be conducted to assess needs for services in order to develop programs specific to the population and culture. Exploratory research can also be a useful way to assess current social needs and existing perceptions of counseling. When conducting counseling research internationally, it may be valuable for the researcher to begin with exploratory studies involving family systems, values, beliefs, and how these may be changing in a global society. When working in a country or region where counseling is a newer profession, researchers may need to develop new instruments for inquiry regarding the perceptions of counseling (Brinson & Al-amri, 2005). Having a better understanding of both professionals and individuals within the society can help improve the training of counseling professionals and increase the quality of counseling services provided (Chan, 2005; Kashyap, 2004).

Counselors can also advance the profession internationally by replicating research on interventions that have been considered effective in the United States. For instance, a replication study might examine a theoretical practice that has been widely accepted in the United States, and needs to be assessed for appropriateness in other countries. (Irving & Dickson, 2006). Replication research could also examine current practices in another culture and assess their application in the U.S. (Alao, 2004). Replication research could help foster intercultural understanding and ultimately provide frameworks for counselors working internationally.

In order to establish new or existing mental health services to underserved areas internationally, financial and personnel resources must be secured. To garner resources, counselors must generate interest with various stakeholder groups including government funding agencies, policy makers, NGO funding sources, and international welfare organizations. Evidence based research is one of the most effective tools to provide data to stakeholders that can help demonstrate needs and impact of counseling services. One form of providing evidence based research is through a systematic program evaluation. Counseling professionals can utilize program evaluation to establish the current status of services in underserved areas around the world. The “Accountability Bridge” is one example of an effective model of program evaluation (Astramovich, Hoskins, & Coker, 2008). This approach to program evaluation can be utilized by an individual helping professional, an agency, or adopted by any collective group who hopes to demonstrate program results to stakeholders.

In order to advance counseling research internationally, counselors should establish collaborative relationships with individuals who live within a particular area of interest. Local professionals can help counselors select research methodologies appropriate for the specific world region. In addition, choosing qualitative methodologies can help researchers avoid imposing western values and minimize the potential for a colonial approach to counseling.

Training

As counseling has grown internationally, helping professionals in other countries have looked for support, collaboration, and training opportunities with U.S. colleagues. Counselor educators are in a unique position to have an impact on the growth of counseling internationally by educating U.S. based counselors about globalization and working with helping professionals in other countries to provide training and supervision in counseling.

Educating U.S. based counselors in international counseling issues can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Graduate counseling curricula can be revised to include a global and international component. Many programs offer electives that students choose from in order to enhance their degree and an elective course in international counseling could be offered to current counselors-in-training and professional counselors. Developing such a course may include establishing an international connection with a particular university which could serve as an exchange between students in each country. Many U.S. universities have already established relationships with institutions internationally. Drawing from these connections, such a course could help students develop an understanding of different cultures through direct contact and relationship building.

In addition to building new coursework into the graduate curriculum, options can be found to integrate a global component to pre-existing counseling courses. A few examples include: 1) promoting research from a global advocacy perspective within an assessment or research course; 2) highlighting international collaborations in helping relationship courses; 3) assigning readings from the “Global Vision” section of *The*

Career Development Quarterly in career counseling courses; and 4) inviting guest lecturers from other countries to share their experiences with students.

Currently, there are a growing number of counselor education programs outside of the United States (Schweiger, Henderson, Clawson, Collins, & Nuckolls, 2007). Unfortunately, there are still many professionals around the world that do not have access to counselor education programs but who seek additional knowledge and training. One response to such a need involves collaboration between U.S. based counselor educators and professionals in other countries to develop trainings or workshops on topics of interest to local helping professionals.

To provide services to more clients, counselor educators may choose to focus their training efforts to current leaders in the helping professions. Then, newly trained leaders could return to their communities and train other helping professionals. Recently, NBCC-I has provided education for mental health professionals through such a “train the trainers” model (NBCC, 2008). Another example of this process that took place on an individual level began when one counselor educator provided a workshop at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, India, for professionals identified as school counselors (Hoskins, 2008). The next step involved collaborating with three of the identified school counselors in New Delhi. In the future, the counselor educator will train the school counselors in service delivery models for school counselors. Ultimately, the school counselors who have participated in the training can be identified as leaders who then can offer trainings to other school counselors throughout New Delhi.

Occasionally, offering trainings and education in specific regions of the world are not feasible due to transportation problems, lack of funding, scheduling difficulties and personal safety. A growing alternative to traditional face-to-face educational opportunities involves online or distance education. Current counseling coursework and workshops can be adapted for delivery through online systems. However, as discussed earlier, offering training that was developed for U.S. counselors may not be the most helpful for internationally based practitioners. Instead, offering trainings that are geared for the unique needs of those in the specific country or region will help promote the success of online or distance education. With advances in technology, virtual classrooms are becoming more accessible worldwide and can often be accomplished with only a webcam and an internet connection.

Conclusion

As counseling continues to grow internationally, continued advocacy for professional identity will help ensure other helping professionals and potential clients have a clear understanding of the role of a professional counselor. Opportunities to build strong collaborations, conduct meaningful research, and provide training with helping professionals around the world will ultimately help all counseling professionals develop a stronger counselor identity unique to their culture as well as internationally.

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