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Understanding the Unsaid: Enhancing Multicultural Competence Through Nonverbal Awareness

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Abstract

Nonverbal communication has a primary role in emotional expression and a demonstrated impact on the counseling relationship. Nonverbal communication can vary cross-culturally and can influence the formation of a therapeutic relationship with culturally diverse clients. This article briefly explores the existing research in counseling and related fields and notes the dearth of research on nonverbal awareness and skills training in counselor education. A review of key differences in nonverbal communication across cultures, an outline of basic skills that can be taught to counselors-in-training, and in-class training activities are provided. The authors call for an increased focus on nonverbal communication awareness and skills training in counselor education research and training programs to enhance multicultural competence.

Nonverbal Communication and the Helping Relationship

Nonverbal communication is the primary form of communication for most of the world's population and was so before the advent of spoken and written language (Leary,

1990). Nonverbal gestures, expressions, and cultural norms and the "rules" regarding cultural norms play a significant role in human communication. Without an understanding of the culturally specific meaning attached to nonverbal communication, exchanges between cultures may be misunderstood.

The emphasis on the importance of nonverbal communication is echoed in research from a number of fields where a trusting relationship is essential including physical therapy (Ambady, Koo, Rosenthal, & Winograd, 2002), medicine (Blondis & Jackson, 1982; Hall, Roter, Blanch, & Frankel, 2009; Kettunen, Poskiparta, & Gerlander, 2002; Swanda, Mendes, Gavao, & Trevizan, 1992), and teaching (Darrow & Johnson, 2009; Pitton, Warring, Frank, & Hunter, 1993; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990). Nonverbal awareness and skills are focused on each of the previously named fields as they relate to the formation of professional working relationships. Nonverbal skills were shown in the above studies to be directly related to therapeutic relationships and positive outcomes. The purpose of the professional relationship in each field is to enhance the probability that the corresponding therapeutic goal will be attained.

Research on nonverbal communication in the counseling profession has focused primarily on emotional and attitudinal communication and was first explored in a well-known study by Mehrabian (1971). Mehrabian found that 55% of the meaning gleaned from communication is through facial and body gestures, 38% through vocal tone and pacing, and 7% through words. The lack of importance of the spoken word in the transfer of meaning can be inferred to relate to all communication, however, Mehrabian's study focused primarily on emotional and attitudinal communication which reflects our corresponding emotional reaction (e.g., surprise, anger, disgust, joy, attraction, dismay) and attitude (e.g., interest, attraction, boredom) to an event or interpersonal interaction. Because counseling as a profession often works within the realm of emotional communication, the need for counselor trainee competency in nonverbal awareness and skills becomes clear.

Both past studies and more recent research on nonverbal awareness and skills in counseling have demonstrated a critical link between nonverbal skills, awareness, and congruity with the formation of a therapeutic relationship (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Grace, Kivlighan, & Kunce, 1995; Hall, Harrigan, & Rosenthal, 1996; Hill, Siegelman, Gronsky, Sturniolo, & Fretz, 1981; Leierer, Strohmer, Leclere, Cornwell, & Whitten, 1996; Maurer & Tindall, 1983; Roten, Darwish, Stern, Fivaz-Depeursinge, & Corboz-Warnery, 1999; Toriello and Strohmer, 2004). Leierer et al. (1996) and Toriello and Strohmer (2004) both explored "facilitative" nonverbal behaviors (i.e., eye contact, forward lean, bilateral hand movements) and their impact on the counseling relationship. Toriello and Strohmer (2004) found that addiction counselors utilizing facilitative nonverbal behaviors were rated as more likeable and credible by their clients who also reported increased interest in entering into a counseling relationship. Additional studies explored the concept of "nonverbal immediacy" which are nonverbal behaviors that are complimentary to the emotional content of the client's experience. Nonverbal immediacy helps clients feel supported (Jones, 2004), and professionals who provide this kind of support are more likely to be viewed as skilled and likeable (Jones, 2004; Jones & Burleson, 2003, Jones & Wirtz, 2007; Sherer & Rogers, 1980). Finally, the impact of congruence between verbal and nonverbal behaviors by the counselor has been explored by Hill et al. (1981). Hill et

al. found that congruent counselor behavior had a significant positive relationship to a successful counseling outcome.

While research exists on the impact of nonverbal communication and the therapeutic relationship in counseling, there is a dearth of current research on the impact of nonverbal awareness and skills training in counselor education. One study by Grace et al. (1995) found that counselors who received training in nonverbal attending and intervention skills showed significant gains in the ability to form therapeutic relationships with clients. In this study, positive gains in clients' perception of working alliance were noted when counseling students were trained in both nonverbal awareness and intervention skills as opposed to nonverbal awareness alone. Counselors-in-training were given instruction on how to track nonverbal behaviors by clients as well as ways to structure interventions based on their observations. This was a departure from previous studies in that its focus was on training counselors to read and attend to the nonverbal behaviors of clients rather than learning how to adjust their own nonverbal behavior.

Increasing Awareness of Cultural Differences in Nonverbal Communication

Given the significant impact of nonverbal communication on the formation of a therapeutic relationship between counselors and clients, the potential impact of cultural norms regarding nonverbal cues becomes clear. Nonverbal communication including gestures, vocal tone, and other elements is more culturally bound than spoken communication (Herring, 1990). This is particularly true for cultures classified as "context" cultures (Hall, 2000; Leathers & Eaves, 2008). "Content" cultures including most Germanic and English speaking countries place emphasis and meaning on words being spoken between individuals. In contrast, "context" cultures, which include most of the rest of the world including Mediterranean, Slavic, Latin American, Arab, Asian, and African cultures, do not find meaning in what is said, but rather what is implied given the type of relationship between those who are communicating (Goman, 2008). The nature of this relationship in a context culture is often displayed nonverbally (Hall, 2000).

Numerous books and training manuals have been published regarding nonverbal communication and the impact of cultural norms; however, they are primarily written for those in the world of business or law enforcement (e.g., Calero & Nierenberg, 2009; Goman, 2008; Navarro & Karlins, 2008; Pease & Pease, 2006). References to nonverbal awareness and skills are often given brief mention in skills training manuals for counselors and other mental health professionals (e.g., Cormier & Nurius, 2003; Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2009; Schafer & Navarro, 2003; Sue & Sue, 2008). The Multicultural Counseling Competencies, as published by the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (Arredondo et al., 1996) include the skill competency, "Culturally skilled counselors are able to generate a wide variety of verbal and nonverbal helping responses" (p. 3). Adding an increased focus on nonverbal awareness and skills to counselor education would ensure that programs are working to fully embrace the spirit of this competency. This focus would be less a matter of training faculty or students to be experts in the subject and more to do with teaching specific concepts to raise awareness that nonverbal communication is an important area of focus in the counseling relationship. In addition, an increased focus on the importance of nonverbal

communication will insure that it has a place in future discussions and research topics in counseling and counselor education.

It is not practical for students, or any counseling professional, to learn the vast number of nonverbal communication differences between selected cultures. Instead, through a general focus on nonverbal communication, counselors can become more aware of nonverbal signals and their impact on the counseling relationship. This awareness and greater emphasis on nonverbal signals can ensure that miscommunication is more often noticed and attended to in cross-cultural counseling (Herring, 1990). Given individual differences, it is not appropriate to expect a certain type of behavior or attitude from someone of a specific culture due to their association with that culture's norms. However, knowing a few key differences in cultural norms can often help to diffuse cross-cultural miscommunication before it starts. Most importantly, knowledge opens up a new avenue of discussion for counselors in that they can talk with their clients about nonverbal cultural norms. The act of talking about cultural differences in an open and transparent manner can show respect and interest in the client's culture and help to deepen rapport and trust in the counseling relationship (Sue & Sue, 2008). Nonverbal awareness training focuses on common nonverbal messages and how they are conveyed. Five areas that can be explored include kinesics (e.g., facial expressions and gestures), paralanguage (e.g., vocal tone and pacing), proxemics (e.g., personal space and barriers), autonomic output (e.g., blushing, sweating), and display (e.g., clothing, office décor; (Cormier & Nurius, 2003). Counselor educators can illustrate the differences in nonverbal communications across cultures through a focus on a key element or elements within each area.

Kinesics

Kinesics includes facial expressions and gestures and is one of the most visible nonverbal areas. Some of the more obvious differences between cultures relates to gestures using the hands and arms and the meaning attributed to them. Due to their widespread use, some gestures are seen as universal. Universal gestures were explored in a number of seminal studies during the 1970's and include the shoulder shrug to indicate not knowing, the palm display to show you are not a threat, and many of the basic facial gestures related to emotional display including happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, and surprise (Ekman, 1971; Ekman & Friesen, 1971). . Modern studies have revisited this assertion and have demonstrated that so-called "universal" nonverbal messages are interpreted more clearly within cultures (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2003), and that in some circumstances they can still be misinterpreted (Jack, Garrod, Yu, Caldara, & Schyns, 2012).

The majority of hand gestures, however, are typically interpreted differently between cultures, and numerous common gestures in American culture including the "thumbs up" and "a-ok" hand gestures have very different, sometimes insulting meanings in other cultures (Pease & Pease, 2006; Manusov & Patterson, 2006). Given cultural differences in the interpretation of nonverbal behaviors, rapport within a therapeutic relationship could be derailed by a seemingly simple gesture. Counseling students can begin to explore the area of kinesics through the discussion of the differences between universal expressions such as happiness, sadness, disgust, and anger and gestures that are different across cultures like the aforementioned A-OK sign.

A key element in the area of kinesics is eye contact, which is subject to a number of cultural rules that can impact rapport. American and British culture for example, are characterized by a moderate amount of eye contact that is used to show respectful interest (Navarro & Karlins, 2008). A different norm exists in Middle Eastern cultural communication, which is characterized by a much greater amount of eye contact (Manusov & Patterson, 2006; Navarro & Karlins, 2008;). In Middle Eastern culture, lack of eye contact can be perceived as disconnected, cold, and uninterested by the receiver (Navarro & Karlins, 2008). By contrast, many Asian, Latin-American, and Native American cultures have a norm that includes low levels of eye contact, and thus the moderate amount given by a Westerner can feel intimidating or aggressive (Navarro & Karlins, 2008). Other differences relate to perceptions of respectful communication and power, which are both vital constructs in any counseling relationship. The low level of eye contact given by a client from a Latin American or Native American culture intended to show respect for someone who is "higher up" in the social hierarchy can be interpreted by a counselor from a Western culture as disconnected and disrespectful (Goman, 2008; Sue & Sue, 1977).

Cultural differences in this area are not confined to eye gaze and gestures. For example, the appropriateness of emotional expression differs between cultures. Cultures can be labeled "affective" (i.e., high level of emotional expression) or "neutral" (i.e., low level of emotional expression; Goman, 2008; Straub, Loch, Evaristo, Karahanna, & Strite, 2002). Italy, France, and the United States are often viewed as "affective" cultures while Japan, Indonesia, and the UK are often viewed as "neutral" (Goman, 2008). An individual from a "neutral" culture can expect minimal emotional expression in most circumstances, and may view the highly charged emotional display of someone from an "affective" culture as inappropriate or rude (Matsumoto, Frank, & Hwang, 2013). Given this difference, it is important for counselors to be aware of cultural expectations they or their clients may have about the appropriateness of emotional expression.

Paralanguage

Paralanguage is defined as the way something is said and includes elements such as vocal tone, pacing, and volume. This is an area that students tend to already "know" as it is a part of verbal communication that is critical in the accurate interpretation of meaning. Focusing on it in counselor education can be a matter of drawing attention to the meaning behind vocal tone, as well as the appropriateness of using it as a discussion topic in counseling relationships. Vocal pacing is often a prominent nonverbal signal in counseling, and discussion as to the possible meaning behind it can help students identify and address the behavior in a counseling relationship. For example, rapid vocal pacing may indicate anxiety while slow pacing and lower vocal tone may indicate sadness (Matsumoto et al., 2013).

A key area related to paralanguage is silence, defined as the absence of any spoken words. Counselors from a western cultural background can view silence as an awkward situation with the unspoken meaning being that neither party is willing or able to speak next. The unspoken meaning behind silence, however, is quite different in other cultures. In Arab culture, for example, silence is a way of showing respect and in many European cultures silence denotes agreement with what is being said (Ling, 2003). An exploration of the possible meanings behind silence can help counseling students become

aware of alternative explanations behind its presence in counseling and in turn look beyond their initial cultural reaction to it.

Proxemics

A nonverbal area closely related to building rapport involves the language of proxemics, or the spatial "zones" that exist between your body and another's (Matsumoto et al., 2013; Pease & Pease, 2006). Respectable distances between people can be very different between cultures and distances displayed between individuals can send signals related to respect, connectedness, and interest (Manusov & Patterson, 2006; Pease & Pease, 2006). The relationship between physical distance and interpersonal relationships is reflected in the English language in that one will speak of feeling "close to" someone for whom there is a strong connection. Latin American and Middle Eastern cultures are characterized as very "close" cultures in that they value a close proximity (i.e., about 1 to 3 feet) to a person with whom there is said to be a close connection (Manusov & Patterson, 2006; Goman, 2008). By contrast, American and European cultures tend to be viewed as "moderate" in regard to proxemics (Manusov & Patterson, 2006; Goman, 2008) in that people from those cultures are comfortable with a conversational distance of about two arms lengths apart (i.e., about 3 to 5 feet). In seeking a moderate distance that feels comfortable and appropriate, a counselor from a Western culture might be viewed as disconnected and cold to a client from a "close" culture (Pease & Pease, 2006). Proxemics are sometimes discussed in many counseling skills courses as they relate to "open" and "closed" postures (Cormier & Nurius, 2003; Ivey et al., 2009). Further discussion of postures and distance as they relate to trust, comfort, and the willingness of clients to explore internal processes can not only increase focus on the impact of nonverbal expressions on the counseling relationship, but also increase the focus on how counselors can "read" nonverbal language to gain a sense of the current strength of the relationship.

A key area in proxemics relates to physical gestures and involves touch. Some cultures value touch as a fundamental part of communication and are labeled as "contact" cultures (Goman, 2008). In "non-contact" cultures, touch is infrequent and appropriate only between individuals who are already "close." In a recent experiment viewing touches per hour in restaurants across the world, people in San Juan, a "contact" culture, averaged 189 touches per hour. In London, a "non-contact" culture, there were no touches between individuals recorded (Manusov & Patterson, 2006; Goman, 2008). Because touch is often viewed as having sexual connotations in American culture, it is something some counselors try to avoid due to a possible negative impact to rapport or even a lawsuit (Zur, 2007). A client from a "contact" culture could see the cultural behavior of Westerners as, again, cold and disconnected.

Autonomic Output and Display

Autonomic output refers to bodily states that arise largely from the activation of the autonomic nervous system during emotional states such as sweating, blushing, pupil dilation, and respiratory rate (Pease & Pease, 2006). These bodily states are universal in that they are basic processes that exist in all human beings, however, the reason for the emotional stress that can evoke these bodily states can vary between cultures (Manusov

& Patterson, 2006). Awareness of autonomic output can be helpful in detecting emotional stress and a cue to explore the client's current emotional state in greater depth.

Finally, display is the nonverbal signals given by a person's attire, adornments, and the decoration in their working space (Pease & Pease, 2006). This is a topic that is often already discussed both formally and informally with counseling students as it relates to professionalism in appearance. Standards of dress for medical professionals vary between and within cultures, and studies have suggested an initial impact to rapport based on the attire of a counselor falling either below or above a client's expectations (Dacy & Brodsky, 1992; Roll & Roll, 1984). Expanding beyond professional dress into areas such as office display and the cultural meanings tied to color are topics that could be easily introduced in a counseling orientation or basic skills course. Colors associated with different emotional states, such as anger, fear, envy, jealousy, and mourning can vary across cultures (Hupka, Zaleski, Otto, Reidl, & Tarabrina, 1997). An exploration of different meanings attached to display can provide another opportunity for counseling students to look beyond their current cultural norms and help encourage their desire and interest in exploring their client's subjective world.

Nonverbal Awareness and Skills Training in Counselor Education

With the five areas of nonverbal communication in mind, there are a number of in-class activities that counselor educators can utilize to assist students in increasing nonverbal awareness. In light of the importance of nonverbal communication of the formation of the counseling relationship, it is important to begin with increasing the counselor-in-training's awareness of his or her own nonverbal communication. Following a brief presentation and class discussion on the elements of nonverbal behavior, students could be asked to review previously recorded sessions of themselves in one or both the client role and the clinician role. In the classroom setting among peers, students would be asked to view the recording twice. First with the sound turned off and with particular focus on kinesics, proxemics, autonomic output, and display; students and their peers would observe and record their observations. Next, with the sound turned on, students would observe and record their observations in regard to paralanguage. After both observations are complete, all students would engage in the processing of their observations. Examples of process questions for this activity include: What did you notice about the students facial expressions, what nonverbal communication did the student's gestures send to the other person in the recording, and what can you surmise about the relationship given the personal space between the two students in the video? For a follow-up assignment students could be asked to complete a journal assignment reflecting on what they learned about their own nonverbal communication. The journal assignment could be graded on the depth of reflection and understanding reported (Hubbs & Brand, 2005).

Another training strategy used to increase counselor-in-training awareness of nonverbal communication involves the use of film. Using film in counselor education has been found to be an effective tool for teaching concepts and increasing self-awareness (Hudock & Gallagher-Warden, 2001; Stinchfield, 2006). Examples of culturally diverse films to be used in this exercise include *The Joy Luck Club* (Stone & Wang, 1993), *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, Kennedy, Jones, & Marshall, 1985), and *Crash* (Haggis, 2004).

The select film can either be shown in class or review of the film can be given as part of a homework assignment. Students would be asked to pay careful attention to the continued interaction of the characters in the film. In each of the five areas of nonverbal communication, students would write a narrative describing the nonverbal exchanges of the characters. A modification of this exercise is to view the film first without sound focusing on kinesics, proxemics, autonomic output, and display. Another viewing of the film with sound will allow for the added dimension of paralanguage to be observed.

Another reflective training strategy can involve a homework assignment whereby students are instructed to observe individuals in a public setting. Students are not to engage individuals in any way, but are instructed to only observe individuals interacting with others. The process questions in the first activity can be modified to address nonverbal communication between those being observed. For examples, student can be asked to reflect on the following: What did you notice about the individual's facial expressions, what nonverbal communication did the individuals' gestures send to the other person in the conversation, and what can you surmise about the relationship given the personal space between the two individuals? In-class processing of the completed assignment could include to recognition of themes in nonverbal communication.

A final training strategy focuses on teaching specific interventions that counseling students can use to attend to nonverbal signals when they are noticed. Training in specific nonverbal attending skills has not been a focus in counselor education coursework and textbooks; however, one exception is a text by Cormier and Nurius (2003). Cormier and Nurius identified five counseling interventions in response to nonverbal communication. The first is a response to silence and includes an invitation by the counselor to explore the meaning behind silence in the counseling relationship. The second and third relate to the relationship between what is said by the client and their nonverbal emotional display. Congruity between the two can be pointed out as an invitation to more deeply explore the emotion, while incongruence can be addressed in a supportive challenge. The fourth intervention relates to nonverbal communication patterns that change over time. Pointing out these changes can invite a discussion about the nature of the counseling relationship or the client's changes over time. The final intervention involves using a client's "in the moment" nonverbal display as an invitation to explore the current process elements within the session. These process elements can be related to rapport or the client's emotional experience connected to the topic being discussed. Through these interventions, nonverbal communication becomes a topic of discussion that can be addressed using basic skills very similar to those counseling students already learn and practice in basic skills courses.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to illustrate the impact of nonverbal communication in the counseling relationship to draw attention to the significant differences in nonverbal communication between cultures, and to explore how counselor educators can increase the focus on nonverbal skills training in the classroom. Although a number of fields, including medical and teaching professions, emphasize the need for nonverbal awareness to build trusting relationships, research in counselor education has not shared this focus. Because the meaning of nonverbal messages is interpreted based on

cultural understanding, it is imperative that counselors work to recognize clients' cultural differences in nonverbal communication.

When fostering a working alliance with multicultural clients, counselors should be aware of a number of nonverbal exchanges that, when misunderstood, could result in damage to the counseling relationship. Nonverbal areas that can be explored include kinesics, paralanguage, proxemics, autonomic output, and display. There are key elements within each of these areas that can help illustrate how nonverbal meaning differs cross-culturally. Counselors are encouraged to invite clients to discuss cultural differences at the onset of counseling and to revisit the topic throughout the counseling relationship.

Counselor educators are encouraged to infuse a nonverbal awareness and skills module into the counseling curriculum. Nonverbal awareness and skill training can include a variety of activities including videotaped sessions, film, observation, and reflective exercises. Counselor educators can also focus on teaching basic skills that can be used to attend to nonverbal client behaviors. In addition to introducing nonverbal awareness and skills in the pre-practicum or basic counseling skills course, nonverbal communication can be revisited in other courses such as counseling orientation, group, theory, and multicultural classes. An increased focus on nonverbal communication will help counselors become more adept at emotional communication, a vital component of the counseling relationship, both within their own culture and cross-culturally.

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