Article 38

The Invisible Client: Ramifications of Neglecting the Impact of Race and Culture in Professional Counseling

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Abstract

Overlooking critical aspects of a client such as race, culture, and perception of societal treatment is harmful and emotionally devastating to clients of color (Butler & Shillingford-Butler, 2014). For Black clients specifically, this type of treatment can lead to feelings of invisibility and isolation, resulting in what Ellison (1947/1990) defined as "*The Invisible Man*." This article examines this idea of invisibility in the Black client and proposes suggestions and framework for counselors working with this population.

Keywords: Black, invisibility, counseling, multicultural

The foundational principles of professional counseling emerged from a predominately White, middle class context (Gerig, 2014; Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). Therefore, clients that do not originate from the dominant society may not have similar values (Butler & Shillingford-Butler, 2014; Wade, 2006). An example of these types of clients is ethnically and culturally diverse populaces such as Black/African Americans (Sue & Sue, 2013). Black clients present unique and complex situations some counselors may not be prepared to encounter (Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014). For example, many Black clients encounter difficulties with stereotypes, racialization, and negative media portrayal of self (Butler & Shillingford-Butler, 2014). When counselors inadvertently ignore the impact of these factors, it can lead clients to perceive that they are invisible.

This notion of invisibility can best be illustrated by Ellison (1947/1990), who asserted in his influential work, *The Invisible Man*:

> I am an invisible man. . . I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (p. 3)

Black clients, in particular, sometimes view themselves as invisible to the counselor and therapy as an institutional barrier that maintains a status quo (Dowden, Gunby, Warren, & Boston, 2014). In fact, feelings of trepidation increase when counselors' behaviors seem to confirm the thoughts Black clients have that they are invisible (Thompson et al., 2013). For example, some Black clients perceive that counselors have a negative bias towards symptomology in multicultural populations and do not understand the impact of racism (Butler & Shillingford-Butler, 2014). Thus, the counselor underestimates the effect racism has on clients' behaviors. What the counselor perceives as cognitive distortions may actually be an effective coping mechanism of the client to deal with racism.

Although not all counselors underestimate the impact of racism on clients, research indicates that a number of practitioners do underrate the influence of discrimination (Vereen, Hill, & Butler, 2013). For instance, some counselors routinely misdiagnose Black clients due to implicit stereotypical misconceptions they have (Ashley, 2014; Williamson, 2014). An additional difficulty of this action is that it biases Black clients towards therapy and further clouds their idea on what exactly counseling entails (Williamson, 2014). As a result, many potential Black clients instead perceive the advice of others and media as an accurate depiction of what constitutes counseling. Lack of correct information tends to increase feelings of invisibility and decrease participation in therapy (Sirey, Franklin, McKenzie, Ghosh, & Raue, 2014). Thus, many Black clients believe counselors are unaware of or unable to understand variables affecting them, which leads to making the client feel invisible. A final issue inhibiting persons of color (and Black clients specifically) is reluctance to disclose personal matters. For Black clients, cultural penchants may prohibit them from speaking about personal issues (e.g., family/self) to others (Butler & Shillingford-Butler, 2014). Moreover, some Black clients have the fear of counselors judging or diagnosing them as irrational or illogical (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014).

Stated succinctly, due to these issues, disconnection can occur between the client and counselor (Dowden et al., 2014). One major problem that arises is not addressing the racialized self (i.e., societal stereotypes and expectations) versus the true self. The consequence of failing to address the above dynamic is counselors being unable to connect interpersonal variables (such as racism and stereotypes) to intrapersonal variables (such as perceived oppression and internalized level of marginalization). As a result, this disconnection can lead to a sense of ostracism in the counseling relationship. Thus, the client may not feel visible to the counselor as a complete person, outside of stereotypes associated with Black culture (Ellison, 1947/1990). Sadly, some counselors may only understand the unfortunate stereotypes associated with Black clients and overlook the impact of these labels on identity or character (Katz & Hoyt, 2014).

Neglecting these critical aspects of the client is potentially harmful when attempting to establish a therapeutic relationship with clients of color (i.e., Blacks clients). For example, disregarding or avoiding the cultural uniqueness of being Black/African American can alienate clients, making them feel as if a major aspect of their existence is invisible. Compounding these issues, as stated by Dowden et al. (2014), is having a counselor who lacks self-awareness. A lack of self-awareness limits counselors' reflective ability and responsiveness to their biases (Young, 2013). Conversely, research indicates that Black clients preferred counselors who were aware of their biases and comfortable expressing emotions (Dowden et al., 2014).

In order to circumvent disconnection and build positive therapeutic relationships, the purpose of this article is to provide a framework for counselors who deliver therapeutic services to Black clients. Specifically, this article highlights the idea of invisibility. To explore invisibility, the authors divided the manuscript into three segments. First, the authors wish to provide counselors with information on how Black clients may feel society perceives them (such as feeling invisible). Second, the authors offer information to help counselors with comprehending and acknowledging the impact of invisibility on internalized racism, oppression, and learned helplessness with a short case vignette. The article concludes with suggestions/implications for counselors who may not be accustomed to dealing with the issues this population faces.

Invisibility's Impact on the Counselor/Client Relationship

Invisibility, as stated by Ellison (1947/1990), is "When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me" (p. 3). Black clients have this perception of being invisible in social situations, yet highly visible in negative ways (Dowden et al., 2014). Invisibility does not entail that Black clients believe they are not visible to others, however. The term deals with the intrapersonal battle many have that society (other people) devalues their culture, beliefs, history, talent, and personal worth (Franklin, 1999). For example, saying, "things are fair now, we should not have affirmative action," promulgates the notion that past discriminatory ideologies should not affect present day beliefs (Paradies, Truong, & Priest, 2014). Further, sometimes counselors inadvertently dismiss the significance of past racial oppressions and how it potentially affects Black clients in the here-and-now (Dowden et al., 2014). An example could be a counselor asking a client of color how their culture affects them, but then not identifying the impact of racism or underestimating the effects of racism.

Stemming from these actions, some Black clients feel as if counselors lack empathy, as part of what makes up their culture (historical significance) is not important (Levine et al., 2014). Proceeding in this manner alienates Black clients and promotes the perspective the past is not significant (Paradies et al., 2014). Thus, Black clients perceive that their difficulties and predicaments are invisible to the counselor. Conversely, due to racial stereotypes and discrimination, Black clients can also perceive that they are highly visible in negative ways. For example, sometimes Blacks/African Americans are spokespersons for their entire race, as if they are the only persons of color (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2010). This dubious and unfair practice overemphasizes race and generalizes beliefs as the same across an entire population. As opposed to feeling

invisible, this practice makes Black clients highly visible, but in a negative and inappropriate manner (Butler, 2003). As stated by Burt (2014), ethnic minorities (such as Black clients) receive an implicit message that their culture is only important when the dominant, or mainstream, society recognizes it as relevant. Thus, Black clients perceive that individuals from the mainstream society only see what they want (i.e., race), but other aspects of their lives are not visible (such as the impact and stress of discrimination, or being different).

A sharp dichotomy exists as Black clients range from feeling intrapersonally invisible to being highly interpersonally visible (Wade, 2006). Such rapidly fluctuating actions take their toll on people, as they feel ripped in different directions. Frequent incidences of racial discrimination and prejudice produce stress and anxiety that impede wellness (Pearson, et al., 2014). For instance, many Black clients create intra-physic barriers that protect themselves (Thompson, et al., 2013). Examples of these intra-physic barriers are clients developing a heighted sensitivity to micro-aggressions, while others cultivate a strong racial identity (Dowden et al., 2014). These coping skills utilized buffer against negative self-beliefs and protect the client from others.

Issues Related to Invisibility

The problem begins to emerge when helping professionals diagnose and treat clients based on outward symptoms instead of considering multicultural perspectives (Levine et al., 2014; Paradies et al., 2014; Wade, 2006). For example, counselors could perceive a Black client with a strong racial identity as ethnocentric or narcissistic (Dowden et al., 2014). Likewise, anger and frustration, emotions long stereotypically associated with Black clients, could merely be a coping mechanism (Wade, 2006). As such, counselors and other helping professionals may misdiagnose coping mechanisms as the core problem (Paradies et al., 2014). A strong racial identity may be the most appropriate coping mechanism for the client, considering the context (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, & Worrell, 2001).

Counselors conceptualize the issues as cognitive distortions needing disputation, while the client feels neglected and unheard (Roysircar, 2009). The counselor does not know what effects discrimination and prejudice have on the client (Carter & Walker, 2014). The longitudinal impact of prolonged discrimination on Black clients is difficult, if not impossible, to establish (Okazaki, as cited in Levine, et al., 2014). As such, it is incredibly difficult to ascertain if the coping mechanisms the client uses are appropriate. As stated by Goodman and West-Olatunji (2010), it is up to the client to decide what is culturally appropriate in regards to the context. Due to this disconnect, a misconception on behalf of the counselor begins to emerge. This misunderstanding isolates and ignores everyday stressors encountered by the client. Hence, there is a lack of emphasis on the Black client's phenomenological worldview and intrapersonal world (Butler, 2003). Thus, counselors who do not consider the client's phenomenological worldview may do the client a disservice.

According to Dowden et al. (2014), the phenomenological perspective is critically important to understand, especially when working with Black clients. The counselor serves as a guide, and the client directs where to go in their universe (Gerig, 2014). Although this seems pedestrian in the field of counseling, research indicates a number of Black clients do not perceive counselors as empathetic to their situations (Ashley, 2014;

Carter & Walker, 2014; Dowden et al., 2014). Due to these issues, the client feels unheard, neglected, and perceives that their plights are unseen to the counselor, resulting in invisibility (Dowden, et al., 2014; Ellison, 1947/1990). Counselors may not be validating clients, which can lead to exacerbating feelings of invisibility and isolation (Franklin, 1999; Levine et al., 2014). Thus, there needs to be attention drawn to this problematic occurrence and suggestions given to remedy this issue.

Case Vignette Illustrating Effects of Invisibility on Internalized Racism, Oppression, and Learned Helplessness

Before proceeding with the case vignette, there needs to be a defining of terms so that all of the concepts discussed are properly understood. Operationally defined, internalized racism occurs when the minority society accepts the dominant culture's racial ideologies and stereotypes about themselves. Making matters worse, there is also a simultaneous rejection of positive aspects of their cultural upbringing. According to Bailey, Chung, Williams, Singh, and Terrell (2011), internalized racism is a phenomenon that disproportionately affects marginalized populations. Oppression is the act of continued subjugation of a group limiting their self-determination and sense of freedom (Moreton-Robinson, 2005). Learned helplessness occurs when organisms (people) repeatedly experience aversive situations out of their control (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). Due to the continuous nature of the events, the person begins to believe escape or relief is not possible. According to Abramson et al. (1978), the person then starts to believe and behave in a way that mirrors an inability to remove him/herself from the problem. Consequently, the person accepts and internalizes whatever negativity occurs due to the situation. Now that these terms have a proper definition, a case illustration will exemplify how these concepts relate to invisibility.

Rupert is a married Black male in his late thirties, with a well-paying job as an accountant for a major distribution company. He has two sons, who come from his previous marriage. He seeks therapy due to some personal issues he has experienced lately. Within the last year, he received a promotion at his job that required him to move to another state that is far from his sons and family. However, at his new job site, he has encountered some difficulties in that he feels others do not respect or value him as a colleague. Further, he is unfamiliar with the new area and feels as if people discriminate against him not only because he is a Black male, but also because he is in an interracial marriage with a Japanese woman. Thomas is a married White male in his early thirties. He received his master's in clinical mental health counseling 3 years ago. Thomas currently works at a private practice, which was his internship site when he graduated. Thomas's clients are primarily White males/female, which represents the demographic of the population surrounding the location of the private practice. Rupert came aware of counseling through his insurance, as the private practice at which Thomas works is a provider.

In the first few counseling sessions, Thomas explains to Rupert the parameters of counseling and what he can expect to experience in therapy. A first-time client, Rupert acknowledges his understanding of the parameters. Over the next few sessions, Thomas begins to explore with Rupert his thoughts, emotions, and how they affect his behaviors, adhering rigidly to cognitive-behavioral therapy. When asked what brought him here,

Rupert proceeds to discuss having a new job, new city, and feelings of insecurity. Rupert continues to discuss how it is strange to be away from his sons, and that he is used to seeing them every week, as he had joint custody. Rupert further adds that being a father is a personal thing to him, as his father was not a strong role model. He further states that most people do not see him as a good father because of stereotypes and prejudices. Thomas asks him to go further and although hesitant, Rupert explains that society (even his own family at times) undermine his presence as a father and are overly critical when he does not do something that is related to his sons. Rupert additionally states that he feels, at times, more pressure because he is a Black man, and "media and people notoriously depict us as being deadbeat dads and absent from the home." Thomas probes Rupert by asking if there is any evidence he has to support his thoughts. Taken back a little, Rupert states, "The evidence is in my face every time I look at a mirror." Sensing a sensitive subject, Thomas quickly changes the subject and asks about his new job. Rupert hesitantly begins to discuss feeling insecure at the workplace. Thomas asks if it is normal to feel uneasy at a new place, and perhaps his feelings are not any different than if someone else was new as well. Rupert disagrees and says,

> Yeah, I know what you are saying, but it is different. Another guy came in at the same time, and it seemed as if everyone just took him in, and he is a jerk. People even refuse to say hi to me, they look the other way and pretend I am not there. I'm the only Black there, and you can tell they do not want me there.

Thomas proceeds to ask what the "new guy" does that makes him fit in, and if there is any way Rupert can mimic, or copy what that person is doing. Rupert begins to get frustrated and states, "I cannot be White. What do you expect me to do"? Thomas, thinking that this may be a good time to confront, asks "Do you think you place too much of an emphasis on racism?" Rupert follows up by saying,

> You just do not get it, you have never been told you are not good enough for something, called a nigger by someone who thinks it's funny, or told by people we do not expect much from you because of who you are.

Frustrated, Rupert gets up and leaves, stating he will never come back again because "you just don't get it." Baffled, Thomas attempts to reflect on what happened in these three short sessions.

Counseling Suggestions and Implications

To circumvent this problematic situation, there is a need for effective culturally sensitive counseling (Katz & Hoyt, 2014). Successful culturally appropriate counseling addresses clients' needs, wants, desires, and trepidations through a full exploration of their phenomenological perspective (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). In the vignette, the counselor asked questions that undermined the experience of the client. For example, instead of asking "What the new guy does that makes him fit in, and if there is any way Rupert can mimic, or copy what that person is doing," instead explore what he (Rupert) thinks is the deciding factor (s) in the co-workers accepting this person. If Rupert states it is racism, then Thomas could explore what racism means to him and what strengths and resources are available to him to deal positively with prejudice.

However, in order for this cultural understanding to occur, counselors need to have several multicultural skills. First, counselors need to have the capability to be a reflective practitioner (Young, 2013). According to Tomlinson-Clarke and Georges (2014), a reflective practitioner is a helping professional who is able to identify personal triggers and cues. Reflectiveness also encompasses knowledge of approaches and skills essential to working with diverse clients, such as effectively using culturally sensitive treatments (Gladding, 2012; Roysircar, 2009). Second, counselors need to welcome and explore differences in worldviews and cultural perspectives (Sue & Sue, 2013). In the vignette above, Rupert became frustrated and left counseling due to an amalgamation of disconnects between himself and the counselor. The final issue that drove a wedge between them was when Thomas confronted Rupert on if he placed too much of an emphasis on racism. Although well meaning, this statement by Thomas serves to exacerbate what Franklin (1999) described as the mindset of many Black clients towards counseling. Succinctly stated, Franklin (1999) espoused that Black clients maintain the belief that counselors cannot help them unless the therapist has an idea/understanding of what it is to be a Black person in Western culture. Third, counselors should establish an empathetic relationship with Black clients that demonstrates cultural appreciation. For instance, counselors need to be aware of how issues such as race, culture, and historical oppression affect Black clients in the here-and-now (Vereen et al., 2013). Instead of exploring how historical aspects affected Rupert in the here and now, Thomas instead chose a more direct path that ignored past experiences, social constraints, and longitudinal impacts of racism and prejudice (Dowden et al., 2014).

To avoid the problems listed above, effective work with Black clients requires adopting a worldview that appreciates a client's potential and creative thought pattern (Butler & Shillingford-Butler, 2014). Proceeding in this manner assists both client and counselor in recognizing the relativity and rhythm of a counseling experience. Operationally defined, relativity ensues when counselors are able to work within a client's frame of reference and understand that his/her perception is relative, rather than absolute. Relativity is consistent with other counseling perspectives, including existentialism and positive psychology (Young, 2013). The use of rhythm requires counselors to detect certain "vibes" in the counseling sessions. In order to establish this vibe, communication must be cogent, with altruistic responses and unconditional positive regard (Burt, Patel, Butler, & Gonzalez, 2013). Concisely, a counselor's understanding of the counseling profession and Black clients' sociocultural history must be combined with compassion, creative reasoning, and a spirit for advocacy (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014).

Religion is also a strong factor that helps to guide Black clients. The counseling environment can assist Black clients by encouraging and promoting spiritual beliefs. Although diametrically opposed in the past, multiculturalism has allowed counselors to incorporate an increased sensitivity for religious/spiritual practices and beliefs (Gerig, 2014). Coupled with the preceding, understanding rites of passage and the impact of these on Black clients' lives is also a critical component of being a safe haven/place of security (Harvey & Hill, 2004). Both males and females can have idiosyncratic ceremonial progressions that mark the arrival, or development, of the person. Being able to identify and empathize through the Black client's perspective helps in creating this safe haven (Dowden et al., 2014). By taking this approach, this speaks to confirming the Black client as an individual, thus buffering against thoughts and feelings of being

invisible. Further, this method can help in offering a search for meaning and purpose in life (Dowden et al., 2014). Taken together, these strategies help in creating a sense of a safe environment and reducing invisibility. Lastly, exploring different models of cultural development helps in being able to understand clients and provide a place of comfort and support (Vandiver et al., 2001).

Conclusion

The walk-away points of this manuscript give reason to think about training/graduate experiences of counselors. In essence, counselors are failing to "see" and service their Black clients. Therapists and counselor educators are supposed to share the goal of providing services directly beneficial to all clients and indirectly beneficial to their communities (Vontress, Woodland, & Epp, 2007). Communities and the greater society stand to benefit when counselors immediately contribute, which requires proper training and its proper use in counseling clients of color (Dowden et al., 2014). This article encourages dialogue in re-evaluating the social and cultural experiences for training graduate student counselors. Additionally, it could be implied that having specific cultural exposure to Black experiences could lead to a greater appreciation and mutual respect between the profession and this identified population (Vontress et al., 2007). However, just as a catalyst for such camaraderie has merit, it is not necessary for the delivery of effective and quality service. Future investigations may want to qualitatively explore the notion of counselors' training and personal experiences as it relates to cohesiveness amongst their Black clients.

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