April 2012

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of identity development models and their importance in conceptualizing clients' presenting problems. It offers instructional methods for teaching identity development to students in a graduate counseling program and addresses relevance and application to actual practice.

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Keywords: Identity Development Models, Graduate Education, Counselor Education, Diversity, Counseling, Racial, Ethnic, Feminist, Gay, Lesbian

According to Salazar and Abrams (2005), graduate students in counseling are in information overload much of the time, because many of them enter programs lacking awareness about issues such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class and sexual orientation. Therefore, it is a daunting process for students to be able to assimilate and apply identity development models. For students to gain familiarity and confidence in applying the models, graduate curricula should emphasize the relevance of identity development to the helping relationship. This may occur in many of the master's-level classes that discuss developmental issues (e.g. multicultural counseling and human development across the lifespan). Alongside traditional teaching methods of readings and didactic lecture, difficult-to-teach concepts like identity development can be brought alive through viewing feature films or film clips (Higgins & Dermer, 2001).

The use of movies in counselor education has been documented in the literature. Higgins and Dermer (2001) discussed the integration of popular movies as an innovative technique for teaching counselors-in-training the skills needed to work with couples and families. Koch and Dollarhide (2000) applied the viewing of the movie Good Will Hunting to teaching a counseling theories class. Toman and Rak (2000) recommend activities using films for several counseling courses: diagnosis, counseling theories, interventions and ethics. Tyler and Reynolds (1998) presented a model for incorporating feature films into a course for teaching group counseling. Movies have also been used in teaching other similar disciplines. Alexander (2006) assessed graduates' perception of the value of using film as a teaching tool in medical education. Graduate students in a southeastern family practice residency program were surveyed. Alexander found that film clips were perceived as an enjoyable and welcome break from traditional didactic approaches and added variety to the curriculum. The students also perceived that film clips and the material associated with them were easier to retain. In psychology, an undergraduate class focused on teaching psychopathology

through film (Fleming, Piedmont, & Hiam, 1990). The use of movies in teaching has a strong pedagogical basis, and can be applied to counselor trainees' and new practitioners' understanding of the complex models of identity development.

A tripartite instructional approach can accomplish these goals through (a) reading and self-assessments, (b) video case studies, and (c) role plays. Each of these methods used on their own has limitations. Lectures and readings may reduce innovative thinking (Browne, Hoag and Berilla, 1995). Video case studies allow for live-action vignettes but do not permit mutual interaction between counselor and client (Higgins & Dermer, 2001). Role-plays are viewed by Cleghorn and Levin (1973) as the most comprehensive technique for acquiring skills, but role-playing can be an overwhelming experience for the beginning counselor (Higgins & Dermer, 2001). However, used in tandem, with an awareness of their limitations, these instructional methods increase students' affective, cognitive, and behavioral complexity by surfacing attitudes and assumptions, expanding knowledge, and building skills.

Developing the Curriculum

Assessments

After becoming familiar with the models through assigned readings, counseling students assess their own development using instruments provided by the theorists or other practitioners. For example, Bargad and Hyde (1991) constructed a version of the feminist identity development scale (FIDS) in 1991. Similarly, Parham and Helms (1985) based their racial identity scale on Cross'(1980) Black identity development model. The womanist identity attitude scale (WIAS) designed by Helms (1996) is useful in assessing the development of Black women. As identity is not a one-dimensional concept, the use of more than one scale, or a scale such as the Self-Identity Inventory (SI) (Sevig, Highlen & Adams, 2000) could be used. Individuals completing the SI may consider multiple identities and intersections of identities rather than limiting themselves to a single identity dimension.

Taking these scales in or outside of class and discussing the results provides an opportunity to think about the ways elements of personal identity and the sociopolitical forces that shape identity offer experiences of privilege or oppression. Gaining insight into their own developmental processes gives students an experiential basis for understanding their clients' attitudes, behavior, and perceptions and recognizing that for all clients, certain aspects of identity are more salient than others to the process of therapy (Worell & Remer, 2003).

Video Case Studies

Self-reflection paves the way for further learning to take place through the analysis of characters in well-known films. These video case studies are the methodological centerpiece of the learning process. First, students view commercially-produced films that are readily available for rental at a nominal cost. After considering the characters within the framework of the models, they share their individual analyses in small groups. A lively discussion involving the entire class follows, in which students become aware that the differing perceptions of their classmates are themselves reflections of identity development. This realization alone is an important outcome: "As students wonder how particular people are reacting to the film, they are learning one of the most

important intercultural skills—how to see events from the other's point of view" (Summerfield, 1993, p. 30-31).

Certain films have proven to be especially useful for this type of analysis because of their compassionate, sensitive portrayal of characters. Favorites include The Color Purple (1985), Rambling Rose (1991), Frances (1983), Thelma and Louise (1991), Fried Green Tomatoes (1991), and Dolores Claiborne (1995). Analysis can take several forms. Students can identify how specific characters manifest characteristics of particular stages of development and compare them to each other in a contextual approach. For example, the movie Rambling Rose (1991) depicts two women at very different stages of identity development and illustrates how the characters' consciousness affects their decisions and the lives of those around them (Harlin, Kassar, Scherick, & Willingham, 1991).

Another method of analysis is to trace the movement of one character throughout the course of the film. For instance, two characters whose growth is stunningly apparent are Celie in The Color Purple (1985) and Thelma in Thelma and Louise (1991) (Spielberg, Kennedy, Jones, Marshall, & Spielberg, 1985; Scott, Gitlin, O'Brien, Khouri, & Scott, 1991). At risk for multiple forms of oppression (racial, gender, and sexual orientation), Celie can be understood in terms of the womanist model (Parks, 1996) or Cass' (1979) gay/lesbian identity model as her self-concept undergoes radical change. Thelma's experiences illustrate several stages of feminist identity development: her servitude to her husband (passive-acceptance), the rape trauma (revelation), her bonding with Louise (embeddedness). Her psychological journey takes her from a state of near oblivion about her life situation to one of brutal clarity, a transformation she expresses with the words,

"Something has crossed over in me," and "I've never been so awake."

Choices of films are plentiful, therefore it should be easy to avoid films that reinforce stereotypes or provide insensitive portrayals of a particular minority group (Pinterits & Atkinson, 1998). Counselor educators should become familiar with the content of the movie and reflect on their own thoughts and feelings that arise while watching before showing it to classes for discussion (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993).

Ponterotto, Utsey and Perdersen (2006) mention two movies that "are excellent sources for seeing how different levels of racial identity development play out in real life characters" (p272): The Color of Fear (1994) and Do the Right Thing (1989) (Mun Wah 1994 &; Lee, 1989). The Color of Fear (1994) features an interracial, interethnic group of nine men who are attending a retreat to talk about issues of race, oppression, prejudice and privilege. Do the Right Thing (1989) features Spike Lee as a young man living in a Black and Puerto Rican neighborhood in Brooklyn, as tensions rise on the streets. After the viewing(s), students are asked to try to place the different characters in their respective stages of identity development for their racial groups. An evidence-based rationale is required for their stage placements. Both films depict members of several different racial and ethnic groups at varying levels of racial and ethnic identity development. Ponterotto, Utsey and Pedersen (2006) also provide general stimulus questions for both movies and lists of other movies for use in the counseling classroom.

Role Plays

Practical application to counseling is the third focus of learning. Role play exercises build on students' investment in

the film characters they feel they have come to know and care about. Role plays can be structured as individual counseling sessions with any one of the characters at any point in their life story, and written case information, or a genogram can be provided for the film clients with more complex stories (Toman & Rak, 2000). For instance, there is general agreement that Louise Sawyer in Thelma and Louise (1991) is at the third stage of feminist identity development (Downing & Roush, 1985) and that had she received post-traumatic counseling after she was raped in Texas, she might have resolved the rage that drove her to kill Thelma's attacker. A role play, therefore, might involve Louise as a survivor of sexual assault and another student as her counselor.

Even more engaging and fascinating is to role play a group counseling session with several of the film characters. In this format, students are able to see developmental contrasts clearly and to experience the power of a group to raise clients' consciousness in a supportive atmosphere. They also notice that clients in certain stages of development are well-suited to group-based intervention while those at other stages make more progress in individual counseling (McNamara & Rickard, 1989).

Role-playing can also demonstrate the pitfalls associated with counselor-client mismatches. Students can observe how therapy is hindered by a regressive mismatch, that is, one in which the client has progressed beyond the counselor. They might also explore the dynamics of a progressive therapeutic relationship (i.e., one in which the counselor is at a later stage of development than the client) and those of a congruent relationship where both are at roughly the same developmental level. Effective processing of the role plays allows students to confront their own identity issues

and to examine how they affect the counseling process. It also shows the models' usefulness as a guide to clients' internal landscapes.

Implications for Practice

The advantages of using identity development models in counseling are numerous. First, it encourages attention to the counselor's own growth. Second, using the model reduces stereotyping as counselors come to realize that any two clients in the same minority group may have very different outlooks and feelings. Third, the model enables the counselor to take on the client's perspective, "to enter her world with a lens that more clearly matches her own" (Worell & Remer, 1992, p. 282). Fourth, identity development models help clients to connect with sources of strength and pride that the dominant culture devalues. Fifth, counselors and clients come to understand sources of stress in a new light and respond to them in more positive ways. Feminist development theory, for example, may give counselors another way to evaluate what occurs when counseling female clients. To begin with, identity development model theory removes the heavily pathological orientation of traditional counseling, recognizing the impact of external, cultural factors that contribute to clients' emotional pain and problems in living. A woman's anger may be seen as a natural development rather than a psychological disorder or an irrational reaction. Thus, client symptoms are reframed as "strategies for coping with an unhealthy environment" (Worell & Remer, 1992, p. 92).

Furthermore, models help to address issues that arise at various stages of development. For instance, it is common for women in stage one of feminist identity (passive-acceptance) to see themselves as victims, have "rescue fantasies" (Greenspan,

1983), and wish for the counselor to rescue them. Discussing this world view can encourage the client to weigh the costs and benefits of her overreliance on others. A power analysis of her relationships with men can "help her to discover for herself the role sexism plays in her problems" (McNamara & Rickard, 1989, p. 186).

One note of warning, however, is sounded by Salazar and Abrams (2005). They remind us that although there are many similarities in the ways individuals move through the developmental process, racial and ethnic identity development is not experienced the same by each group, nor is identity development in other cultural groups (women, people with disabilities, sexual minorities) the same as racial or ethnic identity. Also, the experience of sexism or homophobia is not identical to the experience of racism.

Cognizance of the feelings that accompany their own stage of development enables counselors to recognize when therapeutic effectiveness is in danger of being compromised, as in the case of a mismatch between client and counselor. For example, the anger of a revelation-level counselor might result in inappropriate directiveness, frustration, and intolerance toward the passive-acceptant client because of the client's attitudes about male authority and her relationships with men. The counselor might be reluctant to focus on client concerns in these areas and unconsciously allow a judgmental strain to contaminate the therapeutic relationship. In such cases, referral to another therapist would be indicated.

In general, counselors at later levels of development are probably best equipped to help any client work through issues and feelings, negotiate life tasks and transitions, and continue the process of growth.

Conclusion

A developmental perspective deemphasizes pathology and meshes well with the emphasis on growth and human possibility that informs counseling practice. Identity development models provide a framework for understanding clients' life experience and interpreting it within the context of power and the social structure. Development is seen as a process of becoming aware of the psychological and behavioral effects of power and oppression, coming to terms with it, and progressing to a sense of personal power and self-esteem. The models also heighten counselor sensitivity to diversity and help them evaluate their own ability to engage in helping relationships with various client populations. By assessing their own identity development and that of their clients, counselors can better understand the dynamic interaction between them and thus counsel more effectively and empathically.

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