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Kathryn P. Alessandria

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Acknowledging White Ethnic Groups in Multicultural Counseling

Kathryn P. Alessandria
University of Virginia

This article emphasizes the importance of understanding and acknowledging all families' cultures, not just non-Whites'. It is intended to raise awareness of how White ethnic groups are currently viewed within the counseling field. Rather than comparing other groups to European Americans and assuming that all Whites are alike, we need to understand all of our clients' ethnicities and the world-views they hold. A holistic perspective toward incorporating culture when working with all families and individuals is emphasized.

In the past and even today, having white skin is assumed to grant an individual membership into a privileged group. In the United States, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) value system has become the symbol for "White." Most often, research regarding minorities focuses on a few ethnic and/or racial groups as compared to Whites (Phinney, 1989, 1992; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997), thus assuming that all Whites are alike. The concept of Whiteness is defined by WASP ideals and has, unfortunately, become a synonym for European American views (Hartigan, 1997). Yet, there are many diverse groups such as French, German, Irish, Italian, Greek, Norwegian, and so forth that fall under the category of European American, and each one has distinct characteristics. Not only are their characteristics distinct, but so is the sociohistorical context behind each group's immigration to the United States and the ways in which each group has dealt with immigration issues.

According to Hartigan (1997), if one looks back at the history of the United States, one will find that status as "White" was not equal for all Europeans. The Italian, Slavic, and Irish immigrant groups each experienced a period in which their cultural differences from Anglo-Americans were viewed in racial terms (Hartigan, 1997).

STEREOTYPING EUROPEAN AMERICANS

Approximately three generations ago, when most European Americans' ancestors immigrated to the United States,

the need to assimilate to American culture was obvious; without speaking English and understanding the systems in place, there were no options for advancement. For many immigrants, the reason for immigrating was the hope of a better life; thus, they were willing to try to fit in to reach that goal. The metaphor of the "melting pot" represented this period of history (Giordano & McGoldrick, 1996a; Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992). Today, some of that still holds true; however, the more recent salad bowl metaphor suggests that individuals can find ways to fit into the larger American culture while preserving customs from the culture of origin.

Within the counseling profession, it is not uncommon to hear professionals speak about multicultural issues by comparing specific racial and ethnic groups to Whites, thus making the assumption that all European Americans are alike. As an individual who self-identifies as a first-generation Italian American, I often find myself leaving conferences frustrated after attending seminars on multicultural issues. The descriptions of White do not describe many of the European American people I know, my family, or me. I leave with the impression that the field thinks White people do not have distinct cultures. At a time when the field is trying to raise awareness of multicultural issues and acknowledge and appreciate individuals' differences as well as their similarities, what makes it acceptable to continue to stereotype European Americans as WASPs?

The message is that regardless of experience, if one is White, then it is assumed one ascribes to the WASP value system. By ignoring the distinct differences that exist among the cultures present in this racial group, the need to assimilate to "American" (WASP) culture is perpetuated in the current generation. Yet, if the salad bowl metaphor is accurately to represent the United States, then the differences that exist among the European American groups as well as between and within groups such as African Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans must be appreciated. This appreciation

occurs when therapists gather cultural information from all families.

The assumption that all Whites are alike appears in the writings of leading authorities in our field. "Individuals with a Euro-American worldview in the United States will find their beliefs and values constantly validated because they are functioning within their own cultural context" (Sue et al., 1998, p. 18). "Rugged individualism, competition, mastery and control over nature, a unitary and static conception of time, religion based on Christianity [and] a separation of science and religion" are used to describe this culture (Sue et al., 1998, p. 19). Certainly, some of these are characteristics of Western civilization, but not all represent all European Americans.

If one compares two European American cultures, for example Irish and Italian, more differences than similarities will be found between the two and between them and the WASP characteristics of White culture stated by Sue and colleagues (1998). Italians value family above all else. Trust is reserved for family members and for the few nonfamily members who are treated as family (e.g., godparents); fathers have significant roles and are dominant, whereas women dominate the home; and girls are restricted more than boys. Personal connections are very important. Working hard; enjoying life; and sharing food, music, and companionship with loved ones are also important. Italians also value not relying on anyone outside the family (Giordano & McGoldrick, 1996a, 1996b; McGoldrick, 1996). Food is an expression of nurturance, a way to bring family together, and it is meant to be shared and enjoyed. Catholic rituals and ceremonies also are viewed as a way to bring family together in celebrations.

In contrast, for the Irish, Church rules are of the utmost importance, and suffering is God's way of punishing sins (Giordano & McGoldrick, 1996a, 1996b; McGoldrick, 1996). They also value an active fantasy/dream life, resourcefulness, humor, loyalty to the group, gregariousness, strength, and psychological toughness. Women are viewed as more responsible than men. Children are to be seen and not heard; praise for children is minimal to avoid "swelled heads." Also, alcohol is an important part of social life for many. (The preceding statements are generalizations and not necessarily true for all members of these groups.)

How do these values compare to the aforementioned characterization of White culture? Both the Italian and Irish cultures are more collectivistic than the WASP culture, which values competition, individualism, and the nuclear family before extended family. Both Italian and Irish cultures are expressive, though in different ways, which is different from the WASP value of self-restraint. It seems that being a member of a collectivistic group living in an individualistic atmosphere would be an example of living and functioning in a society where one's beliefs and values are not constantly validated.

CONNECTING ACROSS CULTURES

Looking for differences between racial groups leads to ignoring the similarities. Not only are there significant differences between European American groups, but also there are similarities between European American groups and groups in other races. Vontress, Johnson, and Epp (1999) provided the example of a middle-class African American and a middle-class European American being more alike than a middle-class European American and a middle-class Russian-born White American. Another example comes from personal experience; recently, I worked with a professor on a project regarding the meaning of food in culture and its relationship with eating disorders for Asian American women. Through research and discussions about our own cultures, the professor and I were surprised to learn that much of the meaning and many of the rituals around food in her culture (Korean) and mine (Italian) were more similar than different.

According to Giordano and McGoldrick (1996a), because European Americans can all "pass" for "regular" Americans" to some extent, they have the choice of identifying with their ethnic group or not, which most other groups do not have. However, choosing either way is not without consequences. To choose to pass could result in feelings of loss, disconnectedness, or isolation from one's ancestors. In choosing not to pass, one could experience a sense of disconnectedness or feelings of isolation from those who have chosen to pass, particularly if different individuals within a family make different choices. In a study I conducted regarding the identity and self-esteem of first-generation American (first generation born and raised in the United States) college students compared to non-first-generation Americans, of the 45 first-generation Americans sampled, there were 16 European Americans. When asked the open-ended question, "My ethnic background is?" only 5 out of the 16 responded with a specific ethnic group (i.e., French, Portuguese, etc.). The remaining European Americans responded with broad nonethnic group answers such as "White," "American," and "Caucasian" (Alessandria, 1999). Perhaps these responses provide a clue about the choices European Americans make about passing as "regular" Americans."

What influences people to continue to make the choice to pass? Perhaps those who choose to ignore their ethnicity are still doing so because it may raise their "status" (Giordano & McGoldrick, 1996a). However, it seems there could be some other variables at work in this equation. For those who are beyond the first-generation American experience, perhaps the value of assimilation was passed down through the generations from those who first chose to assimilate. Another possibility might be that the current trend in multicultural counseling of comparing groups to Whites minimizes the value White ethnics place on their ethnicities and how they identify themselves. In other words, because they are White, have they been told that they have no culture and thus come to believe it?

Regardless of whether White ethnics choose to self-identify as such, I am inclined to agree with Giordano and McGoldrick (1996a) and define all people as ethnic. To not identify European Americans as ethnic is to ignore their grandparents, their background, and the sacrifices made for the lives they have today. Whether European Americans choose to identify it, their ethnicities are part of their heritage. This is particularly evident when individuals are viewed in the context of their families (i.e., traditions, rituals, values, etc.). By thinking about people in this way, it becomes important to have information about clients' ethnicities to have a clearer view of the issues, regardless of what generation immigrated to the United States.

Multicultural Approaches to Counseling With Families

Several multicultural counseling approaches incorporate the importance of understanding the social, historical, and political context that led to the individual's or family's presence in the United States, regardless of ethnic or racial group (Arredondo et al., 1996; Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; Mirkin, 1998; Sue et al., 1998; Vontress et al., 1999). Whether working with individuals or families, it is important to gather information regarding who immigrated, when they immigrated, why they immigrated, where they came from, where they settled, what life has been like for this cultural group in the United States, and for their particular family, to provide a comprehensive picture of the issues faced by the family and provide the best treatment possible. Without an awareness of a family's culture, it is difficult to know whether family dynamics are unique or culturally based; this is true for all families. For recent immigrant families, Mirkin (1998) in particular emphasized understanding what the family's life was like before migrating to the United States and after. For example, a family who chose to immigrate to the United States as professional adults is likely to have a different experience than a family of refugees escaping persecution. However, I think this information is important to understanding all clients, regardless of how many generations ago the immigration took place. My experience has been that the stories passed down through the generations incorporate the perspectives and emotions of the ancestors about coming to this country and influence the worldviews of the current generation.

Hardy and Laszloffy (1995) offered the cultural genogram as a specific method for gathering cultural data about families from any group. It was first introduced as a training tool to promote both cultural awareness and sensitivity; however, it can be modified for work with families. The authors of the cultural genogram acknowledge that it is not without bias toward Western cultures, though they attempted to minimize it. The self-awareness trainees gain and the information therapists learn about families from the organizational process of

creating the genogram and answering the accompanying questions (see Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995, for list of questions) will help them to understand and appreciate the complex process of cultural identity formation.

A Holistic Perspective

It is widely accepted that multicultural competencies are necessary, particularly given the diversity of the citizens of the United States, yet debate still exists regarding the distinction between general counseling competence and multicultural counseling competence and whether these are truly different constructs (Coleman, 1998). The argument has been made that the focus of most multicultural counseling competence training has been on areas of awareness and knowledge rather than on specific skills. The importance of an awareness and understanding of one's cultural biases and learning about other cultures is acknowledged (Coleman, 1998; Patterson, 1996; Vontress et al., 1999). Effective counselors view the client's existence in its totality and incorporate their understanding of the effect of cultural context on the counselor, client, and the counseling relationship into the therapy process for clients of all races and ethnicities. Coleman (1998) contended that the debate indicates the need for a contextually oriented perspective when using counseling skills, rather than a necessity for different skills altogether.

Patterson (1996) suggested that therapists focus on Roger's five basic counselor qualities in establishing an effective therapeutic relationship, rather than attempting to develop specific cross-cultural theories and techniques. Aside from specific techniques for specific groups being based on generalizations and stereotypes, Patterson pointed out that it is impossible to address all the permutations of culture, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and so forth that could define different groups. By embodying the five counselor qualities, that is respect for the client; genuineness; empathic understanding; the communication of empathy, respect, and genuineness to the client; and structuring (clarifying and outlining the counselor's role), one focuses on the basic humanness of the client. Patterson also indicated that most outcome studies have found no differences based on client race or ethnic group. Therefore, these counselor qualities are necessary and sufficient to be effective because they are also the elements of all facilitative interpersonal relations and are not bound by time or culture.

Vontress and colleagues (1999) also looked at the basic humanness of clients by taking an existential perspective toward cross-cultural counseling. Their model acknowledges that throughout a person's development, genetics and life experiences interact with each other to shape the nature of his or her existence; thus, each human being is unique from all others. If this perspective is taken to be true, then it is easy to see how families and individuals within families will be influenced by their ethnicities, socioeconomic status, gender,

environment, and so forth. It also makes it easy to see the many different levels at which people can connect. Rather than reduce clients to their racial groups, about which we can make generalizations and assumptions, it is important to gain information about ethnicity and all the other areas that have come together to make that person unique (human). Vontress and colleagues commented that regardless of where clients were born, counselors could help people with problems in living by applying their understanding of culture.

CONCLUSIONS

I tend to agree with Patterson (1996), Coleman (1998), and Vontress and colleagues (1999) that it is important to incorporate acknowledgement of the influence of culture on all clients' lives, but it is not sufficient for therapy. One needs to look at clients in the context of their lives and attempt to understand their whole beings. This cannot be done without the general counselor characteristics originally identified by Rogers and outlined by Patterson. By assuming that European American clients are all alike, counselors are not attending to the whole client. It is time to acknowledge that the approaches to multicultural counseling that are emphasized for minority groups are relevant for all clients and implement this in our practice. McGoldrick, Giordano, and Pearce (1996) and Hardy and Laszloffy (1995) began to bring attention to this issue by including European American ethnic groups in their work. However, these are exceptions in the literature.

There are many similarities and differences between any two groups (White or otherwise). Rather than looking to compare and separate groups, perhaps we should look at all as both unique and similar at the same time. By doing so, the focus is on the clients in front of us, not generalizations about groups. It is important to acknowledge the events and experiences (including culture) that come together to make families and individuals who they are, not just in the moment, but also within a social and historical context. As Giordano and McGoldrick (1996a) pointed out, no one is void of ethnicity. At the same time, a basic humanness joins us all. By understanding the social, historical, and political context of clients, counselors are better able to understand their issues and work more efficiently and effectively.

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Kathryn P. Alessandria is currently a doctoral student in the Counselor Education Program at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Ms. Alessandria's current research interests include multicultural counseling competence in theory and practice, first-generation Americans and the issues unique to this population, and counselor education and supervision issues, particularly group process and working alliance issues in supervision.