

Developing Cultural Competence:
The Need for Enhanced Knowledge, Values and
Skills in an Increasingly Diverse America
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The United States of America is a unique example of a nation which modern history has been dominated by the wholesale immigration of peoples from extremely diverse backgrounds. The potential conflicts of such a formation were evidenced in early relationships between First Nations and British immigrants. The doctrine of the American Melting Pot, in which all citizens would develop and adopt a uniform national character, was the theoretical balm that would soothe inter-cultural tensions. By the 1960's the doctrine of the American Melting Pot was in serious trouble. Not only had cultural communities continued to survive as unique entities, but the civil rights movement and the advent of cultural nationalism necessitated an adoption of other models of understanding cultural socialization (deAnda, 1984).

Since the 1960's various models of understanding cultural difference and socialization have been postulated: Cultural deficit model, cultural difference model and the bicultural model (deAnda, 1984). The cultural deficit model suggested that when ethnically visible and recent immigrant groups held onto their norms and values which differed from European American culture the result was detrimental. This model blamed multigenerational ethnic poverty on the groups' insistence on maintaining cultural norms that were destructive.

The cultural difference model attempted to limit the discussion of cultural interaction by suggesting that each culture should be studied and understood as a separate construct. The comparison of cultures was de-emphasized. This model did little to explain the growing number of persons

in American society who were successfully functioning in more than one cultural context (take Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. for example, the noted minister/activist/international politician).

More recently the bicultural model of understanding cultural difference has suggested the possibility that individuals can develop multiple cultural identities. This is especially true of racially and ethnically visible individuals who receive intensive socialization in their native culture within the family system and later are exposed to the European American culture by means of mass media, the public school system and other social institutions. This dual socialization is said to result in biculturalism. Perhaps the most powerful and often quoted modern example of biculturalism is found in the person of former chair of joint chiefs of staff, General Colin L. Powell (Mungen, 1996).

The bicultural model of understanding cultural socialization and modern cultural adaptation is, in this author's view, the most accurate of the three. Where it fails is in its oversimplification of the challenges to socialization of racially and ethnically visible persons. Though cultural duality is being recognized more and more as an enhanced reality, for many young people who are bicultural by parentage, identity formation is often confused. For these young people, the internal conflicts caused by competing ethnic loyalties can create a sense of insecurity and even self loathing. This negative sense of racial identity is sometimes expressed by young people who refer to themselves using derogatory terms such as "Heinz 57's (being the product of many ethnic varieties)," "Oreos (black on the outside, white on the inside)," "Bananas (yellow in the outside, white on the inside)," or "apples (red on the outside, white on the inside) (Gibbs & Moskowitz-Sweet, 1991).

For social workers, discussion of the failure of the American Melting Pot doctrine is essential. There must be a recognition that all practice settings are multiethnic and that no client is immune from the tensions associated with the development of a unique racial or ethnic identity in an increasingly pluralistic society. There must also be the development of professional practice to meet this issue.

An excellent articulation of these considerations is seen in the work of Derald-Wing Sue and David Sue (1990). Under the headings of; understanding the world view of the culturally different client; counselor awareness of own assumptions, values, and biases, and; developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques; the authors make practical suggestions for the enhancement of knowledge of specific ethnic concerns, the adoption of anti-racist values, and the development of skills which are applicable to a wider diversity of clients.

Conclusion

The changing complexion of American society is causing increased stress for individuals. The previous doctrine of the American Melting Pot is outdated as a description of the solution. Social workers and other helping professionals must develop more relevant models for understanding cultural plurality. They must also develop a greater degree of cultural competence if they are to be of any practical aid to clients who are experiencing the stress of culture shock.

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