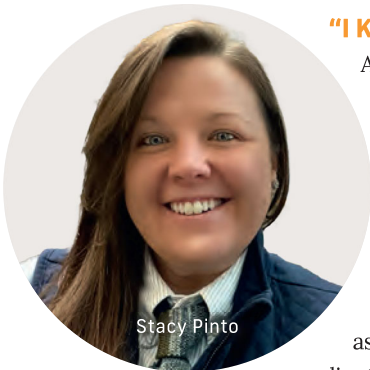


All Counseling Is Multicultural Counseling

Learn approaches that can strengthen multiculturalism within your counseling practice.

By Stacy Pinto, PhD, LPCC; Rob McKinney, PhD, LMHC; and Margarita Martinez



Stacy Pinto

“I KNOW EXACTLY what you mean.”

A simple phrase; yet, when uttered by counselors, it may lead to rupture within the counseling relationship. While this colloquialism may carry intentions of empathy, camaraderie or a desire to deepen the counseling relationship, it also carries assumptions that may minimize client experiences.



Rob McKinney

Imagine as a client that you share an identify with your counselor (race, gender). When a counselor suggests that they “know” your story as it may relate to a shared identity, they are sending a message that they are familiar with your contexts and how your identities and experiences have been influenced by those contexts. Clients may understand this as the counselor implying that they do not want or need more information about their experience and what makes them unique.



Margarita Martinez

Alternatively, imagine holding an invisible identity (sexual/affectual identity, religious identity, disability) that has not been disclosed to your counselor. When the counselor

utters this phrase of “knowing,” clients may find themselves thinking the counselor cannot possibly know because the counselor does not know all identities that they carry. Assumptions like these can be addressed by recognizing that all counseling is multicultural counseling.

Multicultural Counseling

Counseling is defined as a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals. Attending to diversity, or multiculturalism, is at the heart of counseling. Multicultural counseling is a term used to overtly describe a counseling practice that acknowledges and responds to how various aspects of a person’s intersecting cultural identities might influence their mental health. It is not a certification, a division membership or a graduate course — it is a lifelong journey.

Multicultural counseling practice has been described as a distinct approach to counseling that can be characterized by a counselor’s own self-awareness, attention to the client’s worldview, the relationship between these two, and the interventions and advocacy produced from this work (Ratts et al., 2016). The implementation of this type of approach has also been referenced as using a multicultural orientation, which emphasizes the counselor’s continued process of personal exploration, self-critique, willingness to grow and commitment to honor the experiences of others as unique individuals with multiple intersecting identities (Davis et al., 2018).

The era of counseling coursework with specific weeks or textbooks with distinct headings to address “multicultural implications” is becoming part of our discipline’s past, denoting that multicultural counseling is becoming more integrated into counseling curricula. As an extension of this development, more counselors are actively and intentionally working from a multicultural perspective. While it is wonderful that more of this work is being done within counseling training programs and counseling practice, counselors must prioritize the application of multicultural counseling as the baseline for all counseling interactions.

Next Steps

When considering the counseling process and how we can continue to refine our approaches to honor the experiences and identities of others, there are steps that we can take to strengthen multiculturalism within our practice. Here are a few:

Increase our cultural view of self. Start by better understanding who you are as a cultural being. We bring our cultural selves into every session. “Who am I and what identities do I hold?” is a great question for counselors to ask themselves. Answering this question may include reflecting on your lens, consulting with others about the cultural identities they perceive when they consider you, reflecting on identities through journaling, or exploring held identities via reading or research. Engagement in personal or group counseling can also support growth in this area by providing an avenue for processing identities, trauma and other related experiences.

Develop our knowledge of culture. Develop knowledge about diverse identities by widening professional and social networks to include a broad range of identities and thoughts. Maintaining circles of both familiar and new connections can promote growth and help us consider alternate perspectives. Counselors can also learn more about cultures within and beyond their communities by attending open cultural events, such as cultural festivals or Pride events.

Focus on cultural moments. Tune in to the cultural moments that occur in the counseling relationship. Whether it is while collecting information during an intake session, discussing a salient client identity, exploring family issues or even just asking about someone’s weekend, all of these (and more) are opportunities for cultural moments for the counselor to capitalize on and explore.

Work toward cultural accountability. Create transparent and honest spaces for accountability with peers, colleagues, a supervisor and others. Practice humility and invite critique and advice while conveying that the input of others is valid and valuable. Practice collectivistic and ancestral knowledge sharing; elevate wisdom and lived experience. These relationships will help to identify and process cultural elements of your work.

Engage in advocacy. Engage in advocacy efforts and social justice initiatives. Learning about cultures can often highlight needs within communities, such as legislation that is impacting specific groups or resources that are scarce in certain areas. Counselors can leverage their skills and networks to work alongside and in support of communities in their efforts toward change.

Mentoring and consultation. One of the best ways to promote multicultural counseling practice within our discipline is through mentoring and consultation. Regardless of where we are in our careers, we are positioned to share what we have learned and to learn from others. Beyond traditional hierarchical mentoring structures, consider more egalitarian mentoring and consultation opportunities within pairs, triads or groups. These relationships allow us to learn from one another’s missteps and successes related to multicultural counseling practice, while also addressing imposter syndrome and normalizing early career struggles with cultural complexities.

These steps are examples of starting points — ways to enact your commitment to continuing education, personal and professional growth, and social justice advocacy. As you strive to build and fortify your competence, what is the next step of your multicultural counseling journey? ■

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