



The Value of Anthropology to Counselors

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ABSTRACT

Social-cultural anthropology has dealt with mankind from so many different angles and with such a variety of approaches that it is understandably difficult to get a handle on what exactly an anthropologist does. Nowadays anthropology goes everywhere where people are acting and making sense of these actions. If any human grouping is fair game for anthropological study, this of course multiplies the possible fields and questions for study to an infinite degree. An unavoidable consequence of the growth of any discipline is that we find some fragmentation, with scholars divided according to schools, research issues, geographic areas of specialization, theoretical orientations. With all of this riotous diversity, as anthropological insiders we somehow—and not without difficulty—identify a common thread in the discipline in its status as the science of culture. The fact that anthropology is not widely taught as a discipline in the standard high school curricula in most countries adds to the aura of mystery and misperception among the general public. Especially through the ethnographic method, anthropology created tools for studying and understanding the seemingly strange actions and conceptions of Other peoples.

The starting point for this discussion is to take four concepts from anthropology, the study of people in cultures, and to apply these to highlight areas in counseling. The four concepts are emic, etic, culture and culture-bound. This discussion takes the notion of cross-cultural counseling and states that when a therapist and client meet there is a cross-cultural communication taking place; regardless of the racial educational or socio-economic similarities between the two parties. The author wishes to highlight some areas in counseling where greater awareness is required to create a holistic counseling philosophy and to improve the ethics, power sharing, efficacy and appropriateness of therapy.

Keywords: Social-cultural anthropology, counseling philosophy, etic, emic

In the world of academic social science, then, anthropology has often seemed to take on a decorative role of adding color and spice, and in this sense it may have appeared to

be preoccupied with trivial or irrelevant questions and situations. Anthropology's newly recognized relevance has attracted the attention of other disciplines within the academy, and in the university systems of many countries, social-cultural anthropology has played a minor but appreciated role for the contributions it can make to a very wide range of discussions. Anthropologists are addressing critical social issues in their own societies in a number of ways: in the choice of their research themes; in the way they design and carry out their projects with research participants; in the courses they teach; in non-academic work they are performing in local communities, either professionally or on a volunteer basis; in how they make the messages developing out of their research known and accessible to different audiences (from smaller sites of diffusion to participating in conversations in the mass media). Over the last two decades in particular, there has been an increasingly palpable conversation in anthropology about the wide spectrum of activity being carried out that has been conjugated in numerous forms of advocacy, activism, policy shaping, collaboration, participation, and work for transformation in the communities researched and in society as a whole.

A number of anthropologists today have been calling on colleagues to more boldly face the challenge of bringing anthropological knowledge to the public. While there are certainly various arenas for doing this—for example, by appearing in the news media, through blogging, by performing consulting and advocacy outside of the academy—museums remain a key site for communicating with non-anthropological audiences.

So, first of all, I would like to present two words which may be new to you. The first is *etic* and the second is *emic*. An *etic* study, viewpoint or understanding is one in which information is gathered according to preconceived notions and concepts which were in force before the study was started. In counselling, this is fitting the client to the therapist's constructs. Such an *etic* approach in counselling produces pseudo client-centred therapy. In the worst case the therapist has only one style of working and doles out the same attitudes and approaches to all clients. *Etic* therapy is a theoretical science approach to counselling - it creates careful definitions and first principles on which to base its findings. Then it adds on other principles to the first principles.

Culture clash in therapy and cross-cultural counselling is created by rigid *etic* philosophies. The various models, schools or systems of counselling and therapy all propound a certain world view.

I believe there are many philosophical and cultural beliefs inside of American counselling and therapy which do not fit in Britain (Pill & Scott 1982) or Europe, or are shared by many of the citizens of the States who have different values. I think in therapy there can be an exploitation of the client by the more powerful therapist, although such an exploitation is unwitting or unconscious. I ask practitioners to carefully reflect on and give attention to the power play between themselves and their clients.

The other word I wish to introduce to you is emic. An emic understanding or viewpoint is a subjective or phenomenological one. Viewing the world through the client's eyes is one of the avowed intentions of many therapists. But to actually take the time or be able to come to such an understanding is a difficult thing. An emic understanding is one where the therapist has elicited the frameworks of meaning, classificatory schemes and ideas of causation of the client. The therapist allows the client to define his or her problem to his or her own satisfaction.

A starting point for anthropology is a definition of the term culture. Briefly, an anthropologist regards individuals as the legs of a millipede. Each leg moves in accordance with the others. The anthropologist seeks to study the whole creature.

Culture occurs at national, regional, local and neighbourhood levels. There are different influences on culture from economic, religious, financial and political forces. There can be said to be cultures and cultural norms for men and women, for the middle aged, teenager or child. And, to return to one of my original points, there are the cultures of jobs and professions. Each job has its own job culture, norms of behaviour and shared values. To be a counsellor or therapist has its own cultural implications, as all therapists have been indoctrinated by their training.

The importance of culture in personal terms is that our worlds are largely shared, created and maintained by the people around us - our social context. A social learning theory of knowledge, and hence personality, states that we are created with inherent genetically derived qualities, but then the social environment shapes the individual to be similar to others in that environment. This is the process of enculturation - the way of acquiring culture. Central to enculturation is the power of beliefs. Beliefs cause nocebo and placebo (Shapiro 1971) reactions. Nocebo or the power of negative belief is the mechanism behind voodoo death. Such is the power of socially constructed realities. Beliefs held by groups of people in conflict with one another are the justifications for perpetrating all sorts of actions, therapeutic interventions and wars against one another. Central to the holding of beliefs by people is how one group of people regard another people's beliefs. I define irrationality as being something you don't believe in. Hence, rational thought, behaviour and justifications are culture bound. Counselling and psychotherapy needs a careful philosophical, ethical and cultural analysis to identify and acknowledge the presence of culture-bound beliefs (Helman 1987). Emic psychotherapy research could make a study of the lay beliefs of clients who are socially and psychologically suffering.

Finally, let us be enriched by meeting with people from diverse cultures, educational backgrounds and socio-economic status. Only when we disregard the bonds of our own logic, truth and life, can we embrace the logics, truths and lives of others.

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