

## FEATURE ARTICLE

Each day we become more aware of the increasing diversity in our populations and in our client caseloads. After reading the following article in the APT Newsletter, it seemed appropriate to share it with all of our readers. The author has authorized this reprinting as well as inviting any discourse you the reader might want to share with her.

### Diversity 101

By Stella Kerl, PhD

From time to time, a student in my Diverse Populations course or a Multicultural Counseling workshop participant will say to me, "Why do we have to emphasize our differences? Why don't we just focus on our similarities?". This type of approach to diversity is called the 'Universal' approach, and traditional psychology theory and practice has often taken this perspective in the past. It was thought that, since we are all human beings, our similarities were greater than our differences, and connection in the counseling relationship could be attained with anyone through our shared experiences of humanity. Another variation on this theme is the perspective that, since we all have individual differences, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. are just some of the characteristics that make all of us unique. The goal of counseling is to get past 'superficial' differences like race, ethnicity, etc., and get to the real issues.

I do not take this perspective. Although some counselors continue to take this perspective, the majority of scholars in the field of Multicultural Counseling do not. Why?

The Universal perspective does not take into account sociopolitical history and past/present power differences based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. It suggests that counselors look beyond these differences, but who can really do that? Research tells us that while many people say they 'see the person, not the race,' they continue to operate under unconscious biases, favoring the dominant race and the dominant gender. Society as a whole reflects these biases, leading to on-going inequality, stereotyping, devaluation, etc.

When race, etc., is ignored, what is left is an assumed commonality of experience, a 'human race' that is based on the experience and the perspective of the dominant race. When race is not specified, which gender becomes the normative gender (Hint: mankind, manpower, all men are created equal)? And always, which sexual orientation is assumed? This last point is especially and overwhelmingly true of work with children.

I believe that for a counselor, this perspective can easily lead to ineffective and potentially harmful counseling practices. First and foremost, it can prevent a counselor from ever really seeing and hearing a client: from seeing the pain of being the darker sister, from understanding the same about having immigrant parents, from hearing the pride when one of 'us' becomes visibly successful. The universal perspective means that the client would need to be the one trying to teach the counselor what it means to be 'not the norm'. (Historically, to be different has meant to be deviant, devalued, the bottom of the hierarchy).

Secondly, if counselors try to ignore or suppress differences based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, they will not be able to see their own role in perpetuating bias against these groups. They will not be able to see areas where they have privilege and power, and may end up contributing to a client's oppression—with all the best intentions. Some of the well-known research about clients of color tells us that they are underrepresented and underserved in the field of counseling, that they terminate counseling/therapy after only one session 50% more than white clients, that they often feel distrustful and misunderstood by mental health professionals. I believe that Universal perspective is partially responsible for some of these concerns.

I once had a counselor tell me that he 'didn't really see a person's race,' that he just preferred to speak to a person's soul. I left his office and never came back. His words said to me that he wouldn't be able to see or speak to my soul: my soul is brown and speaks Spanish.

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