1987

Counseling of Japanese college students in cross-cultural contexts

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Abstract

There a1·e a fairly good number of Japanese students studying at many American colleges and universities Counseling of Japanese students should be examined from two aspects: Japanese students as international students and as Asians with cultural values similar to Asian Americans. Some studies have been done on the mental health of Asian Americans and international students and the needs for cross-cultural counseling of clients with diverse cultural backgrounds. Little research has been done which focuses on Japanese students. In this paper, I would like to address some cultural characteristics which influence a counseling relationship and processes of counseling with Japanese students in a multicultural context.

Counseling of Japanese College Students in Cross-Cultural Contexts

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

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August 1987

This Research Paper by: Satoko Watanabe

Entitled: Counseling of Japanese College Students
in Cross-Cultural Context

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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6/30/87
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There are a fairly good number of Japanese students studying at many American colleges and universities. Counseling of Japanese students should be examined from two aspects: Japanese students as international students and as Asians with cultural values similar to Asian Americans. Some studies have been done on the mental health of Asian Americans and international students and the needs for cross-cultural counseling of clients with diverse cultural backgrounds. Little research has been done which focuses on Japanese students. In this paper, I would like to address some cultural characteristics which influence a counseling relationship and processes of counseling with Japanese students in a multicultural context.

Many Japanese people do not have a strong identity as individuals, because Japanese culture emphasizes a group cohesion and conformity. Individualism is more likely to be discouraged as a threat to the maintenance of group harmony.

Many Japanese young people do not have a strong ethnic identity as other Asian young people do. One factor which contributes to this lack of ethnic identity among young Japanese generations is the current educational system. The present educational philosophy does not emphasize Japanese cultural and ethnic identification in school curriculums; this reflects how Japanese society views ethnic identity. Japanese society has a somewhat negative connotation about ethnic identity since World War II, because strong Japanese ethnic identity was misused as a motive and justification for the

war. After World War II, young generations have been discouraged from having a strong ethnic identity as Japanese through education and social pressure.

There are other factors which influence the Japanese perception of their identity. Many Japanese people feel they are Westernized because of a long history of Western influence and Japanese advanced technology. However, mentally they maintain strong Asian characteristics, even though they dress in Western clothes, live in modern houses, have cars, TV, stereo sets, eat Western foods, and learn English. This dual aspect of Japanese culture is unique, and it is crucial for counselors to be aware of it in counseling with Japanese clients.

I will discuss what needs to be known about Japanese clients when counselors deal with Japanese students, focusing on the following areas: a) cultural adaptation, b) barriers to utilization of mental health services, c) cultural values, and d) needs for cross-cultural counseling

Cultural Adaptation

For most international students, adaptation is a major problem at the early stage of international students' life in the United States. Many international students experience culture shock, which is one stage in the process of adaptation and acculturation (Dillard & Chisolm, 1983). "Adaptation is the satisfaction of those

needs related to survival, or the process whereby an individual accommodates to an environment...Adjustment and acculturation are necessary components of adaptation" (Surdam & Collins, 1984 p.241).

During culture shock, many international students feel inadequate, alienated, lonely, and frustrated; they become less confident and often confused, because they do not know how to behave in a new environment. They feel resentful of a new culture, because they are afraid of losing their own cultural values by assimilating a new set of cultural values. As a result, many international students need some kind of help for their emotional and psychological adjustments to American life.

What kinds of emotional adjustments do Japanese students have to make during this acculturation process? Many newly arrived Japanese students are not ready to accept the fact that they are different culturally from American students, since they are very familiar with American culture through TV, movies, music, etc. Thus, they expect to know much about "real" American life and culture. Because of these illusions and unrealistic expectations, Japanese students tend to experience a severe culture shock.

It must be noted that Japanese society is very homogeneous; many Japanese students have never experienced discrimination or prejudice until they come to the United States. Japanese students who were never exposed to discrimination, will be shocked to realize that they are a minority here. They might be forced to look at their social status from a totally different perspective.

There are three stages in the process of acculturation: 1) a period of well-being, the so-called honeymoon period; 2) a period of increasing apprehension, apathy, depression, the so-called nightmare period; 3) a period of well-being, a period of adjustment with a new perception and new self (Kahne, 1975).

I could illustrate these three stages from personal experiences. In the first stage, I felt that everything was exciting, promising, and fantastic. I had an illusion of American college life as free and pleasant. I felt everyone was nice and friendly. In the second stage, I suddenly started feeling depressed, negative, and critical about residence hall life and American students. I complained a lot about classes and American students' attitudes toward me. I felt that many American students were unfriendly and indifferent. I really resented them, because I felt they might make fun of me. Many international students become sensitive to discrimination and prejudce, since they often feel out of place or unwelcome. Many Japanese students come to realize that there are gaps between their stereotyped images of American people and the American people they meet on campus.

In the second stage, international students go through the transition between an old culture and new culture, an old value and a new value, an old self and a new self. As mentioned before, many international students feel very critical of American culture because of their fear of losing their traditional cultural values in the process of learning a set of new cultural values. They feel

lost because of their lack of knowledge about appropriate behaviors in the American culture setting.

In the last stage, I learned how to live between two different cultures. I become more autonomous and independent from both cultures. I become more aware of my ethnic identity as a Japanese and as an Asian. I become more content with my life in the United States. In this stage, many international students feel comfortable with themselves and their lives, since they know how to behave in a particular situation. For Japanese students who become well-adjusted to American life, especially for women, it is difficult to go back to Japan to readjust to Japanese society. It is not polite to express one's opinion and challenge professors, for example.

There are several factors which influence the adaptation of international students: 1) the length of time spent in the United States, 2) English language facility, 3) religious participation and attitudes, 4) perceived student's discrimination, 5) participation in activities and use of student services, and 6)international student interaction (Surdam & Collins, 1984). Students who have been in the United States for two to four years may be less well adjusted; they need additional intimate contact with others, because they might not yet have developed a sufficient support system (Surdam & Collins 1984). Their competence in the English language, positive attitude toward religion, less negative experiences with discrimination, and interaction with American students are

significantly related to their better adaptations (Surdam & Collins, 1984).

Although some Japanese students speak English quite fluently, they feel inadequate or less confident when talking in English. They fear making mistakes, and they have been taught to be modest about their abilities. These Japanese students give American students an impression that Japanese are shy or quiet. This impression of quiet Japanese students makes their social life limited, and it may make their adjustments a little more difficult than other international students. It is not culturally appropriate to talk too much in Japanese society; it is often perceived as untrustworthy.

Many Japanese young people are not religiously oriented. This means that they do not have a strong religious preference or background. Most Japanese students indicate that their religion is Buddhism if they are asked, but they do not practice it through their daily lives. However, Japanese students with a Christian background may go to church during their stay in the U.S. It is important to note that some Japanese students feel very negative toward Christianity, regarding it as a dogmatic and self-righteous religion,because some American missionaries in Japan were too aggressive in trying to convert them.

Barriers to the Utilization of Mental Health Services

"International students almost invariably suffer from stomach aches, headaches, and homesickness" (Kahne, 1976, p.36). International students present their stress-related problems as physical problems rather than as psychological ones (Dillard & Chisolm, 1983). It is evident that the utilization of health centers by international students is greater than that of counseling centers. It gives one the impression that the need for international students to receive professional counseling assistance is less than that of Americans, although the opposite is true (Dillard & Chisolm,1983). Asian Americans utilize counseling centers or psychiatric services less than Caucasian Americans (Sue & Kirk, 1973). Studies have shown that only the most severely disturbed Asians seek help at psychiatric services (Kitano, 1969; Sue & Sue, 1974).

From these observations, I hypothesized that Japanese students at UNI would show a low rate of utilization of the counseling center for their emotional problems. I interviewed five Japanese students who are enrolled as undergraduate students about their use of the counseling center. None of them ever used its service. They do know about the counseling services available for various problems, including academic and personal ones.

"Since few foreign universities have developed service units to provide counseling and guidance to students, most foreign students

neither expect nor seek - and may even resent - what they perceive as interference in their lives" (Hendricks & Skinner, 1977, p.125). Students who have been inexperienced with a professional counseling services perceive it as a untrustworthy, inappropriate means for solving personal difficulties (Dadfar & Friedlander, 1982). Few Japanese colleges and universities have counseling centers which provide psychiatric services to students, although most colleges and universities have vocational and academic counseling services. This unfamiliarity with counseling and psychiatric services, as professional help for stress-related problems, discourages Japanese students from utilizing counseling services for their emotional problems.

Many international students have never experienced counseling as a helping source in their home countries. Because of this lack of information about and experience with counseling services, many international students feel reluctant to see a counselor for their emotional problems (Hendricks & Skinner, 1977). From my interviews, I found that Japanese students at UNI do have knowledge about counseling services, but they do not regard the services as a primary and reliable helping source for their problems.

Then why do Japanese students behave this way when they have problems? Many international students handle their psychological stress in their countries with the assistance of family members and peers (Dillard & Chisolm, 1983). If a Japanese student has a problem, he or she tries to hide such a conflict from public view

(Sue & Kirk, 1975; Kasahara, 1974)). It is not socially appropriate and acceptable for Japanese clients to reveal personal matters to "strangers" or "outsiders" (Sue 1981). It is perceived as shameful and disgraceful for the individuals and their families. In the Japanese culture, bringing honor to the family name, avoiding the shame and disgrace of admitting mental health problems, and restraining potentially disruptive or strong feelings are appropriate behaviors (Sue & Kirk, 1975).

Friends are also an important helping source for emotional problems of Japanese students. As do many of the minorities in the United states, Japanese clients tend to share the intimate aspects of their life only with close friends (Sue, 1981; Kasahara, 1974). However, for newly-arrived Japanese students, these primary helping sources are not available immediately, since the students are far away from their families and close friends. As a result of this lack of emotional support, many Japanese students often feel depressed about their problems, and are forced to seek another source of help.

Japanese students, similar to other international students and Asian Americans, often perceive mental health services negatively. Students might be afraid that they would be perceived as deviant or abnormal by seeking psychiatric help. Another cultural value which affects the attitude of Japanese people toward seeking help is that most believe that they can maintain mental health by exercising willpower, avoiding unpleasant thoughts, and occupying one's mind

with positive thoughts (Sue,1981). This strong faith in willpower hinders Japanese persons from accepting and confronting their problems. It also indicates that they believe their problems will go away if they keep their strong willpower.
This cultural value particularly interferes with traditional Western counseling approaches and techniques.

In summary, there are three factors which prevent Japanese clients from utilizing mental health services: 1) unfamiliarity with mental health services, 2) other sources may be used, such as family members and friends, and 3) cultural values.

Attitudes and Expectations toward Counseling

Japanese clients, like Chinese and other Asian clients, tend to repress their feelings and are less verbal than Caucasian American clients. Therefore, they are often perceived as difficult to deal with therapeutically (Sue & Sue, 1975). Japanese people highly value suppression of emotions, especially negative feelings such as anger, disappointment, fear, and sadness. Japanese children are taught to control and hide emotions from others. It is regarded as a weakness not to be able to control their emotions. Japanese society emphasizes cooperation and harmony within a group, and it is necessary for an individual to compromise with others. It is not often appropriate to express one's feelings or emotions to

others,because it may upset others and hinder harmony among group members (Sue, 1975; Kasahara, 1974).

It is important for a counselor to be aware that if a Japanese student seeks help, the problem is of a serious nature or probably beyond his or her control. It is necessary for counseling centers to promote their services so that more Japanese students know there is another source for their problems beside their friends or family members. A brief introduction of a counseling service in an orientation may be helpful for newly arrived international students in order for them to become familiar with its services.

Similar to other Asian clients, Japanese clients prefer a logical, rational, structured counseling approach, while many Caucasian Americans prefer an affective, reflective one (Yuen & Tinsley, 1981). Japanese students, like Chinese students, are more passive and less responsible for an outcome of the counseling process than Caucasian American students. On the other hand, Caucasian Americans expect to play an active role in the counseling relationship, admit responsibility for their counseling process, and are ready to take action (Yuen & Tinsley, 1981). Japanese clients also expect less confrontation from the counselor, less openness and motivation from themselves, and less immediacy and concreteness in the counseling process (Yuen & Tinsley, 1981). Their passivity and lack of initiative in the counseling process reflect their respect toward authority, but this tendency is often interpreted negatively by counselors.

Some Japanese students expect the counselor to treat them in the manner they expect doctors to treat them (Sue, 1981). They expect or seek an immediate solution and concrete tangible forms of treatment, such as advice, consolation, and medication (Sue, 1981). These expectations of Japanese clients may cause conflicts with counselors whose approaches are unstructured and non-directive (Sue, 1981).

These findings support the needs of multi-cultural counseling and its application to counseling of clients with culturally diverse backgrounds, including Japanese clients. Traditional counseling aims at the middle-class White American and has not met the needs of clients with various ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Sue, 1981).

Needs for Cross-Cultural Counseling

Before discussing effective counseling approaches for Japanese clients, I would like to examine some characteristics of traditional counseling which have failed to meet the needs of culturally different clients, including Japanese clients, and compare differences in counseling methods or concepts between East and West.

Some of the reasons for the failures of traditional Western counseling in a multicultural context are: monocultural assumptions of mental health, negative stereotypes of minority life styles, ineffective, inappropriate, and antagonistic counseling approaches (Sue,1981). These characteristics of traditional counseling may

cause misunderstanding in communication between counselors and clients and lead to alienation and inability to develop trust and rapport (Sue, 1981).

There are several cultural characteristics of counseling which may be responsible for negative beliefs toward counseling. In counseling with culturally different clients, it may not be appropriate for a counselor to expect them to obtain insight into their personal dynamics to gain verbal, emotional, or behavioral expressiveness. With such expectations a counselor may transmit his or her own values to a client (Sue, 1981).

"Japanese culture may value restraints of strong feelings and subtleness in approaching problems" (Sue, 1981, p.38). As mentioned before, it is not acceptable to share personal matters with strangers or outsiders in Japanese society. This cultural value is a crucial obstacle for the counselor who works with Japanese students.

There is another cultural characteristic which may be an obstacle for a counselor who works with Japanese clients. "To many of the culturally different who stress friendship as a precondition to self-disclosure, the counseling process seems utterly inappropriate and absurd" (Sue, 1981, p.39). For Japanese clients, it is particularly important to establish trust before counselors encourage them to disclose themselves. It may take longer to build rapport with them than with American clients. However, once clients perceive their counselors as trustworthy, their relations are more

secure and stable. Secondly, ambiguous and unstructured aspects of counseling may result in discomfort of clients. Since culturally different clients are not familiar with counseling, it is an unknown and mystifying process which creates anxiety and confusion and jeopardizes their counseling relationships (Sue, 1981).

Thirdly, there are a wide range of differences in communication among culturally different clients. These differences may place them at a disadvantage in counseling. Many Asian clients may not speak until they are spoken to in counseling (Sue, 1981). This reflects their respect for elders and authority figures, but counselors without understanding of this cultural value may interpret them as passive, unmotivated, less committed, and less responsible for counseling outcomes and processes (Sue , 1981). It may violate their cultural values when counselors force their Japanese clients to initiate conversation. So, it is more appropriate for counselors to direct counseling processes and initiate conversation in the counseling with Japanes clients.

Fourthly, Caucasian Americans and Japanese have different concepts of mental health and mental illness. As mentioned before, Japanese clients tend to have a negative attitude toward mental illness and counseling in general (Sue, 1981; Kasahara, 1974). Also, it is interesting to note that Japanese clients feel comfortable talking about their physical problems so that they may rely on physicians helping them with their emotional problems or expect counselors to treat them in the manner physicians treat them.

Another characteristic is that theories of counseling tend to emphasize left brain functioning in Western societies, which are distinctly analytical, rational, verbal, and strongly stress discovering cause-effect relationships (Sue, 1981). On the other hand, Asians and American Indians view the world from right brain functioning, which is an intuitive, holistic and harmonious way (Sue, 1981). If counselors use left brain oriented, analytical approaches with clients with different cultural backgrounds, it may violate client's basic philosophy of life (Sue, 1981).

There are several other characteristics of counseling which may cause some conflict in counseling with Japanese clients in particular They are: a) distinction between physical and mental well-being, b) cause-effect relationships, and c) nonverbal communication. Further explanation of each of those follows.

In Japanese society, people do not make a clear distinction between mental and physical illness and health. As previously stated, many people believe their willpower maintains their mental and physical well-being. As mentioned previously, this emphasis on cause-effect relationship may violate clients basic philosophy. It may be more useful to use a holistic approach to work with Japanese clients.

Nonverbal communication is one of the key elements in cross-cultural counseling; 85% of communication in the counseling relationship involves nonverbal communication (Ivey, 1971; Dillard, 1983). "A gesture, tone, inflection, posture, or eye contact may

negate or enhance a message" (Sue, 1981, p.41). It is dangerous for a counselor to assume certain behaviors or rules of speaking are universal and have the same meanings everywhere (Sue, 1981).

For example, Japanese clients use eye contact and silence in distinctive ways. "In every interpersonal relationship, the act of staring at the person with whom one is talking is quite extraordinary and considered to be rude" (Kasahara, 1974, p.402). A continuous stare creates displeasure and discomfort for Japanese, and it is appropriate to look downward, especially for women (Kasahara, 1974). Direct eye contact from counselors may make Japanese clients very nervous or uncomfortable in counseling sessions.

Silence may be interpreted differently by Japanese clients and American counselors. "Silence may be viewed negatively by Americans...In Asian cultures, silence is traditionally a sign of respect for elders" (Sue 1981, p43). Silence for Chinese and Japanese people indicates waiting until they are ready to make a particular point. In contrast, Caucasian Americans may interpret silence as annoying and try to pick up the conversation immediately (Sue, 1981). I should note that silence is not uncomfortable for Japanese clients. It is more appropriate to have silence in conversation. It is crucial for counselors to be comfortable with silence to encourage Japanese clients to elaborate further (Sue, 1981).

Understanding of Japanese nonverbal communication patterns is important for counselors who work with Japanese clients since "the mode of communication among Japanese is markedly nonverbal and indirect" (Kasahara, 1974, p.403). Japanese clients are not used to frank talk and prefer vague expressions; frank talk and direct expression may be interpreted as rude or harsh by Japanese clients. For example, they tend not toanswer in a direct manner, such as "yes" or "no". Rather, they use more ambiguous words such as "maybe" or "I will think about it". They are so hypersensitive that they are fearful of saying something which may hurt others' feelings (Kasahara, 1974). Japanese clients may expect counselors to understand despite their use of vague and indirect expressions. It may cause misunderstanding between Japanese clients and counselors.

It is important for culturally skilled counselors to be sensitive not only to his or her own cultural values and bias but also to a clients's cultural values and to differences between the two. The problem is how counselors can acquire the sensitivity and awareness of cultural differences. Counselors who work with culturally-different clients may need to spend some time trying to understand their clients' cultural values and backgrounds through observation in the early stage of the counseling process. It may be helpful to use the techniques used by anthropologists to study other cultures, such as participant observation. Since counselors do not have specific knowledge about an individual and his or her culture before they start a counseling session, this technique helps

counselors to gain specific and clear pictures of the client and his/her cultural values. These may have a great impact on the counseling process.

It is valuable for both counselors and clients to work beyond their cultural differences to understand each other and themselves better. However, great progress needs to be made before counselors become culturally skilled and are able to meet the needs of culturally different clients.

The following are some suggestions for counselors who work with Japanese and other Asian clients. It is significant to be aware of differences which exist in cultural value orientations and behaviors between counselors and their Japanese clients. It is also important to use different approaches, such as a directive and structured approach rather than a client-centered, unstructured approach.

Peer counseling may be helpful to establish a good rapport between counselors and clients. However, it is important to be aware of the hierarchy, since Japanese clients are sensitive to the rank and position they and their counselors are in. Counselors may have to present themselves as an authority figure or an expert to be effective in the counseling process. Counselors may need to present themselves as a father figure to be directive and as mother figure to be nurturing and supportive (Sue, 1981).

Japanese clients tend to have a more emotional attachment to counselors than American clients, since they perceive a counseling relation as a life-long relation rather than a temporary one. It is

essential to clarify what they can do and cannot do in the beginning to avoid unrealistic expectations from Japanese clients.

I do believe there are great needs for cross-cultural counseling, especially in training programs. It may be essential to acquire sensitivity and awareness of cultural differences to observe and understand clients accurately and respond to them appropriately.

Training programs through workshops and conferences can teach counselors to identify differences in values and behaviors between their own and their Japanese clients, to acknowledge differences in expectation between Caucasian Americans and Japanese clients, and to become sensitive to non-verbal cues Japanese clients use.

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