

Foreword

Decolonization of Mind and Behavior: A Responsibility of Professional Counselors

By Anthony J. Marsella

This volume is about counseling. But is also about something so much more than what we usually think about when we refer to counseling. This volume is about “multicultural” counseling—that is the responsibility and obligation of counselors to understand and respond to the process and product of counseling in a multicultural society. We are all aware that the dominance of North American and European cultural traditions and values that have governed counseling methods and practices have exacted a harsh toll upon racial and ethnocultural minority groups by imposing biased solutions to a spectrum of personal problems. These solutions have too often invalidated the life experience of these groups, compelling them to sacrifice their identities and histories in favor of pseudo adjustments to the dominant cultural traditions.

The question must be asked, “How can successful counseling ignore or be indifferent to the cultural context of a person’s life?” How can the personal history of being a racial or ethnocultural minority be avoided or denied with all of its consequences for accumulated injustices, oppression, and abuses? When this occurs, it is no longer counseling as a healing art and science that is present, rather it is simply a re-socialization. Re-socialization according to a dominant culture or power occurs when governments of repressive regimes create camps to destroy lives by indoctrination and the removal of any resistance. And here, the issue of “decolonization,” which is the essence of this volume, emerges as a critical concept.

“Decolonization” is not a political term as some expect, and thus shy away from its use and understanding; rather it is about liberating the mind and behavior of a counselee within the context of exploring (1) the process of who they are at this time, (2) how they have become the person they are, and (3) why there may be dissatisfaction and problems, pain, and suffering in their life. “Decolonization” constitutes an effort to free a counselee from the sources of their imposed socialization that ultimately deny them the opportunity to explore their roots and to build their character and person within the historical context of their native cultural traditions.

De-colonization recognizes that the distribution of “power” is part of every relationship, and that this distribution can be asymmetrical. If the counselor fails to consider her or his role and function as sources of power, she or he can harm a counselee by imposing certain ill-considered methods and content rooted with cultural and historical contexts that sustain the abuses of power. In this age of reductionism, when so much emphasis is being placed upon the neurological and psychological determinants of human behavior that are located within the individual, there is a massive failure to grasp the cultural determinants. It is as if each individual is solely responsible for his or her actions, including their problems through choice and preference. But this ignores the complex forces that modulate mind and behavior, especially the sociocultural contexts that too often are rooted in the injustices associated with race, class, and status. Trying to heal a Muslim college student by focusing on their infirmities and complaints apart from the tragic context of vilification and abuse present in American society today cannot have successful outcomes for counselor or counselee. What is needed is an awareness of cultural determinants of behavior by both parties and a willingness to explore the role cultural abuse, denial, and oppression may play in the counselee’s problems. In the case of many Muslim students and adults, the extensive and unwarranted criticisms of Islam is forcing Muslims to develop emotional and mental health related problems as a result of the obvious conflicts between their traditional beliefs and identities and the harsh and brutal assaults on them.

This view does not deny the pressures and values to acculturate to the demands of the larger society in which one is located, but rather to do so with a grasp and comprehension that the forces of acculturation must not be permitted to destroy diversity, for it is diversity that enables any culture to respond to demands with varied alternatives rather than fixed and static solutions. This view recognizes that adjustment to a dominant and “disordered” society requires that a counselee be given the opportunity to explore the issue of power and its sources in socializing individuals and groups and the potential for destruction to occur. My answer to many of these questions has always been to advocate “selective detachment.”

Consider for a moment the African-American population in the United States. For more than 250 years, African Americans have been subject to the consequences of a denial of their history and roots. Even today, amidst increased freedoms, most African Americans and dominant White populations have little awareness of the traumatic toll exacted not only by 200 years slavery, but also by the post-slavery years of “peonage” (“slavery by any other name”), physical assaults, segregation, and widespread institutional racism, condemnation to poverty, and denial of legitimate efforts to discover identity and self-sufficiency as articulated by James Baldwin, Malcom X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Randall Robinson.

The same can be said of so many different racial and ethnocultural groups whose individual and collective problems can be traced to the denial of their heritages and the abuses imposed upon them by those in power. Native Hawaiians (*Kanaka Maoli*) are yet another example of a people who have excessive medical, physical, psychological, and social problems not because of some defiant gene as

some colonial powers would say, but because they have been denied the comfort, solace, and strength of their historic cultural identity. The healing that is needed is not to adjust to the dominant society even as conflicts abound, but rather to recover and assert identity, and to find in it the roots of responses to indignities, humiliation, and oppression. This is the case for Native American Indians, Latinos, Asians, and Middle-Eastern populations. Homogeneity is the problem. Heterogeneity is the answer.

It is essential as counselors and as human beings that we recognize the socialization matrix of a dominant culture and its consequences for nonmembers. Consider the fact that the dominant ethos of North American popular culture is rooted in individualism, materialism, commodification, consumerism, competition, celebritytization, violence, sexual preoccupation, constant change, and technological fascination and acceptance. Now, juxtapose this against indigenous cultures that emphasize collective, spiritual, cooperative, traditional, and subjective experience. Clearly, there is conflict, and while the cultural encounters can become sources of benefit for all parties, they can also become sources of abuse and denial by cultures in power seeking to advance their ways of life.

In this scenario, and it is the scenario that exists in the United States, victims are created, and uninformed counseling can become a tool of the majority. There is a seductive appeal to North American popular culture as it enters/penetrates/dominates another culture. Some might say, "Why resist, it is much better than what they have?" No it is not! I do not wish to romanticize traditional cultures of Third World nations and people. But the implications of accepting and using the "American" way as an arbiter of normality must be considered before it is blindly accepted.

The fact of the matter is that the dominant North American and Western European cultures are themselves a function of historical powers that resulted in colonization of indigenous populations, established via imperialistic impulses. Consider that at one point in time, the sun never set on the British empire (India/Pakistan, Australia, Afghanistan, Canada, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Palestine, South Africa, Ireland, Caribbean Islands, Malta, and on and on). In all these instances, the native people were compelled to submit to British occupation and exploitation and to the colonization of mind. They were taught, directly and indirectly, to feel inferior and inadequate before British culture and might. They were denied identity and personhood. In what may now be considered a historic irony, the national dish of England is curry—a reverse colonization that helped both to improve the British palate and to serve as a reminder that, as William Gladstone, a past British prime minister, once said, "God does not value a person from one nation over the life of a person from another nation." These words began the decline of the British Empire as conscience emerged as more important than power.

This then is the challenge for counseling as a profession and science—to be a source of recovery and healing by decolonizing mind and behavior, and by restoring the roots of resolve in the fundamental foundations of personal and cultural identity, and conscious and intentional choices for "selective detachment." Here I believe that the dominant White culture of power and hegemony also needs to consider its

position and to grasp the consequences of colonization for themselves and others. There can be no doubt that the demographic profile for the United States and for many other Western nations is changing as population growth occurs among minority populations and declines among White populations. But the real issue for all parties is the need to recognize that each is a function of colonization of mind. It is only an issue of who has the power to shape mind and behavior and what are the personal, societal, and national costs of doing so for all.

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