Applying a Social Justice Framework to College Counseling Center Practice

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Counselors are often challenged to address issues of social justice in the counseling context, and they must be deliberate and innovative in their attempts to respond. Counselors will be required to relate social justice considerations to their practices and to the theoretical foundations of these practices; they must then operationalize an approach that suits their particular practice setting. The authors present the early results of their attempt to meet this challenge.

A social justice approach to counseling (or any other endeavor) is based on (a) the acknowledgment of broad, systematic societal inequities and oppression and (b) the assumption of the inevitable, if unintentional, location of every individual (and every professional field) within this system. In turn, this assumption then obliges responsible action that contributes to the elimination of systematic oppression in the forms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other biases. This concept is closely related to multiculturalism, with its emphasis on cultural, racial, and ethnic issues, one of which is social injustice and oppression.

It is easy to find examples of the increasing attention that is being given to social justice in counseling and psychology. Lorraine Bradley, during her term (1999–2000) as president of the American Counseling Association (ACA), chose social justice and advocacy as the thematic focus of her term (see Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Bonnie Strickland, the recipient of an Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology from the American Psychological Association (APA), has commented extensively on the topic of psychology’s unintentional support of patriarchal, Eurocentric, classist social norms (Strickland, 2000). According to Strickland, professionals in the mental health field have frequently reexamined and reevaluated their positions regarding these norms, yet additional reconsideration by psychologists and counselors of their most basic assumptions is still needed.

We still consistently place the reason for the occurrence of psychopathology within the person. The anxiety, depression, and dissociative disorders which may be adaptive signals of stressful life conditions are pathologized as the emotional weakness of the “mentally ill.” . . . We must expand our boundaries by remembering that our theories and methods were designed to be replaced. Today’s notions . . . will be as outmoded to the next generation as hysteria, the schizophrenogenic mother, and lobotomies are to us now. (Strickland, 2000, p. 336)

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Outside observers of the mental health field have come to similar conclusions. In his address to the APA's 2000 annual conference, the Reverend Jesse Jackson reminded psychologists of Dr. Martin Luther King's charge to professionals in the field 30 years earlier (King, 1968). Jackson explained King's view that the social sciences are instruments of change and that, to this end, psychologists and counselors should "question the precepts of society, and reject those that permit injustice to form and grow" (Jackson, 2000, p. 328). According to King, psychologists should not allow themselves to be comfortable members of an unjust status quo: "Even as you help people make terrible choices between one evil and another, you can reject the limitations imposed by those forced choices" (Jackson, 2000, p. 329).

Members of professional associations such as the APA and the ACA are focusing their efforts on these goals. It is notable that the expressed goal of Counselors for Social Justice, an ACA division, is to promote individual and collective social responsibility and to encourage the eradication of oppressive systems of power and privilege. Related goals are contained in the mission statements of the ACA's Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development and of APA Divisions 17 (Society of Counseling Psychology) and 45 (Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues), among others.

A similar movement is evident with regard to college counseling center practice. Archer and Cooper (1998) emphasized that counseling centers must be willing to redefine traditional counseling models and roles in order to serve diverse groups of students. In fact, counselors should expand their focus to include the university culture itself: "[Counselors] cannot disregard the social, political, and cultural changes that are necessary to make the college or university a productive environment" (Archer & Cooper, 1998, p. 115). Examining the historical foundations and future challenges of the university counseling movement, Hodges (2001) discussed the increasing diversity of college populations and the resulting imperative that counseling centers develop multiculturally competent modes of practice. "For university counseling centers to ignore cultural influences and diversity is not merely shortsighted," stated Hodges, "it threatens the viability of the profession" (p. 170). Humphrey, Kitchens, and Patrick (2000) drew attention to individual counseling practice within the college setting, pointing out that the training of most staff members was based on conventional Eurocentric, male-oriented conceptions of treatment and development that may be inappropriate for an increasingly diverse college student population. Furthermore, the authors cautioned that the continued use of these approaches without modification is "unethical in [its] promotion of cultural bias" (p. 293).

Many college counseling centers across the country have developed multicultural initiatives. For example, counseling center staffs have studied and worked to improve their multicultural competence as therapists and as supervisors of interns (e.g., Lee et al., 1999; Rogers, Hoffman, & Wade, 1998; Sevig & Etzkorn, 2001). Their efforts have resulted in a variety of programs and services, such as multicultural cocurricular activities (Grieger & D'Onofrio, 1996); groups for gay male, lesbian, and bisexual male and female students (Welch, 1996); bicultural "assertion" training groups (Fukuyama & Coleman, 1992); and peer
education programs that target the developmental needs of historically underserved populations (Nolan, Levy, & Constantine, 1996).

Through their multicultural programming, college counseling centers have been instrumental in encouraging institutions to acknowledge and serve all students. However, how might a counseling center, as one specific setting within the many sites of practice for psychologists and counselors, attempt a more comprehensive, systematic response to calls within the field for “the advancement of psychology in the public interest” (Strickland, 2000, p. 337)? As the staff of a counseling center at a small, urban, women’s college, we posed this question to ourselves: How can we collaborate with our institution to provide first-rate service to students so that we “move into this new century leaving not one single person behind” (Mays, 2000, p. 326)? The focus of this article is to respond to the challenge of applying social justice principles to college counseling center practice. We first review the literature on multicultural counseling and social justice and then explain how we have applied and operationalized these tenets in our specific setting.

Foundations in the Literature

Our attempt to formulate a social justice context for our work reflects the impact of many scholars who have guided and influenced us over the years. These individuals include psychologists, counselors, sociologists, philosophers, and other writers who have inspired us to think more broadly and to expand our purview as clinicians. These scholars’ voices echo throughout our work, and although they are too numerous for all to be credited here, a few must be mentioned.

Many of the individuals who have influenced us have helped to shape and define the field of multicultural counseling and, thus, will be familiar to students in the field. They include Derald Wing Sue (e.g., Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999; Sue & Sue, 1999), who has explained that therapeutic efforts will be ineffectual unless the external sources of many clients’ problems are addressed (e.g., stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression). Sue also emphasized that alternative approaches to therapy, including changes in roles, interventions, strategies, and therapy settings, are essential to working with clients from oppressed or marginalized groups. Alan Ivey (1995) developed his concept of psychotherapy as liberation on the basis of his interpretation of Paulo Freire’s (1970) seminal Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Ivey’s view was that multicultural counseling and therapy should seek to inform the individual on how the sociohistorical past, present, and future affect cognition, emotion, and action. Using Freire’s terminology, Ivey explained that through the facilitation of conscientização (or critical consciousness), counselors can assist clients in liberating themselves from disproportionate self-blame by helping them to understand their situations in a social context; this knowledge can lead the client to take more adaptive personal action (Ivey, D’Andrea, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2002). Other scholars, including William Cross (1991), Janet Helms (1993), and Robert Carter (1995), have presented racial and identity development models that are critical in analyzing the identity development of counselors, clients, and institutions—an indispensable step in formulating multicultural interventions.
Feminist analyses of the therapeutic enterprise have provided vital insights regarding the implications of uncritical reliance on conventional diagnostic nomenclature and treatment approaches. Phyllis Chesler (1972), Paula Caplan (1987), and Carol Tavris (1992), among others, have offered explications of the inherent biases against women and other nondominant groups in the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA, 2000) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Finally, the writings from the Stone Center (Jordan, 1997; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) have made it clear that it is impossible to understand the emotional development and well-being of all humans from within a White male heterosexual context. In offering a new perspective on women’s development through such concepts as growth in connection and self-in-relation, they demonstrated that to begin with another group’s (in this case, women’s) experiences, voices, and “ways of knowing” is to transform one’s understanding of healthy development, psychopathology, and counseling technique.

Other important influences lie, perhaps, just outside the multicultural mainstream. Edward Sampson (1993) elucidated a useful distinction between accommodative versus transformative approaches to multicultural change, explaining that accommodative, add-on strategies attempt to address the experiences of diverse groups by adding a new feature to the old system, leaving the original, dominant system fundamentally unchanged. This strategy, whether intentional or not, perpetuates the dominant system rather than being “a genuinely transformative response to those who seek to have their own voices count” (Sampson, 1993, p. 1220). He encouraged practitioners to transform their work by letting go of their expert stance, making room for differing voices, listening with openness, and engaging in balanced and enriching dialogue with individuals who have been quieted or asked to speak only in the language of the dominant culture.

Philip Cushman (1990, 1995) highlighted the role of consumerism in current psychological ills and therapeutic solutions. Cushman persuasively explained how psychotherapy supported the cultural status quo by helping clients to better accommodate themselves to the dominant cultural terrain by, for example, making them better consumers and, so, better contributors to the perpetuation of a materialistic society. He also explained how psychotherapy could simultaneously and subversively offer clients a set of values that differed from those prized by mainstream Western culture: specifically, authenticity, empathy, and connectedness. Cushman contended that what psychotherapy fails to address are the social, historical, and political factors that breed inner emptiness and aimlessness.

Isaac Prilleltensky (1994) described the myth of unqualified equal opportunity that is inherent in mainstream Western culture. The individual is considered to be responsible for his or her successes or failures; no consideration is given to the existence of an unjust society. Prilleltensky believed that psychology unknowingly promotes this myth by pathologizing individuals as it downplays social factors and their psychological effects. He argued that psychologists and counselors derive their ideas about socialization and functioning from prevailing ideology; however, the field seems to be unaware of the sources of its conclusions. By presenting itself as value neutral, the field encourages the public to accept psychological tenets as fact rather than as a set of ideas that reflect and support social
and political conditions. By promulgating expert theories about human behavior and normality while largely ignoring the impact of social systems, psychologists and counselors contribute to the perpetuation of an individualistic and inequitable status quo.

Finally, we have taken inspiration from our college’s stated mission for the community and its vision for the college’s counseling service. In recent years, the college administration has actively sought to develop a counseling service that would have a scope beyond providing individual counseling. The community’s role in supporting such work is crucial; obviously, no counseling center is an “island.” The evolution and improvement of any single service can only be sustained with ongoing input and collaboration from the institution, and the ability of that service to contribute to achieving the institutional mission is an essential part of that collaboration. Barnard College’s mission statement affirms the college’s commitment to diversity; it sets forth the goal of preparing students to flourish in a multicultural world and to go forward in leadership and in service to that world. This is the spirit behind our endeavor to integrate a social justice perspective into our counseling work as we aim, as always, to facilitate the emotional well-being, personal development, and academic achievement of the students. In short, we aspire to support the college’s mission as well as enhance our service to students, our community, and our profession.

A Social Justice Framework

Studying the work of the previously mentioned authors and of other authors, we began as a counseling service staff to envision a social justice framework for college counseling work. We started during 2001 by attempting to define social justice for ourselves. We worked to apply this perspective broadly to counseling in general and to our setting in particular.

In general, we understand a social justice perspective to rest on the following straightforward premises:

1. The current societal status quo is characterized by inequitable distribution of power, resources, and individuals’ access to same.
2. We recognize that, inevitably, we are part of this status quo and that we participate (even if unintentionally) in its maintenance.
3. Recognition of the foregoing obliges a response that contributes to the establishment of social, political, and economic parity.

When this perspective is applied to the field of counseling as a whole, a social justice approach to theory and practice is rooted in a sociocultural understanding of psychological functioning. All forms of oppression, such as racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism, clearly undermine emotional and interpersonal well-being and, thus, have the potential to result in psychological symptoms. A social justice perspective acknowledges the role that dominant cultural values and mores have in shaping the field’s concepts of pathology and wellness, as evidenced by,
for example, the history of pathologizing female socialization and frustration. Notions of normality and abnormality, which are thus informed by cultural currents, are then defined in psychiatric nomenclature and treated with interventions that target the individual’s “interior” by focusing on behaviors, symptoms, and intrapsychic dynamics. Other important exterior origins of distress, many of which are systemic and perpetuated by cultural and political processes that advantage some while alienating and neglecting others, are largely unacknowledged. Recognition, then, of the cultural and political implications of traditional theory and practice obliges counselors to go beyond these approaches, to consciously locate themselves and their clients within a sociocultural context so that counselors can work to understand their clients’ stories and address their symptoms.

In applying this framework to the college counseling setting, our goal is to extend and transform the nature of our practice at several levels. We believe that continuing to improve our own self-awareness regarding cultural identity and social justice is key to our work. We acknowledge the sociocultural dimensions of psychological theory and practice, and our goal is to be attentive and responsive to these issues as they become relevant within the counseling context and within our work in the college community.

Principles and Guidelines for Applying a Social Justice Framework

The following outline serves as a working draft of the tenets and goals that constitute the social justice framework. The conceptual assumptions were presented earlier in this article. The statements that are presented under “Implications for Practice” outline the specific ways that we intend for these assumptions to take shape in our work. We outline goals in the areas of self-awareness, individual practice, practice within the college community, and the relationship that we hope to develop with the surrounding civic community. This outline is a work-in-progress that expresses our aspirations for the evolution of our service.

Conceptual Assumptions

• Traditional counseling and the psychological theory on which it is based are not value neutral, but are based on a particular set of sociocultural assumptions (whether acknowledged or not). In turn, the counseling field influences cultural notions of health, illness, “normality,” and personal success and failure.
• Hence, counseling and psychological practices have cultural and political implications (whether or not they are acknowledged).
• At a societal level, the traditional conceptualization of the field as a value-neutral, purely scientific enterprise contributes to the public’s acceptance of the inevitability of the cultural and political status quo.
• Similarly, counselors’ traditional focus on the individual deflects examination of social factors, thus effectively contributing to maintaining the status quo.
• At an individual level, counselors’ traditional focus on internal sources of personal distress, along with their relative neglect of cultural, social, political,
and economic factors, obscures and perpetuates the influence of these sociocultural forces in individuals' lives.

- Forms of oppression that are evident in the status quo, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism, are powerful influences on individual psychological development and functioning.
- To address the embeddedness in the field of counseling in an unjust status quo, counseling professionals must attempt a broad transformation of their work; accommodative, addendum changes to existing theory and practice alone will not suffice.

**Implications for Practice**

**Self-Awareness:**
- Commitment to continued, deliberate attention to one's own self-awareness and critical consciousness
- Willingness as professionals to challenge traditional socialization
- Examination of the unquestioned assumptions that govern practice
- Commitment to learn from the cultural experience and knowledge of clients and others
- Commitment to putting awareness into action: praxis
- Commitment to persistence in this work, despite the complexity of the issues

**Individual Practice:**
- Commitment to study the interface between social justice issues, culture, and psychological development and well-being
- Commitment to the implementation of culturally competent practice
- Attention to the impact of oppression and other contextual factors on presenting problems and symptoms as part of counseling
- Recognition that the counseling process can appropriately encompass the facilitation of critical consciousness
- Ongoing consultation with diverse groups of students and others in the community to learn how they can be supported most appropriately
- Expansion of the concept of individual practice to include less traditional roles (e.g., educator, consultant, community advocate) and language to make services more relevant and accessible to all students

**Practice Within the College Community:**
- Willingness to listen to and work in partnership with the community as we evolve and improve our services; ability to be flexible, measured, and collaborative
- Inclusion of and collaboration with students and others in the design of our programming and interventions
- Development and presentation of preventative and psychoeducational outreach and programming in the context of relevant sociocultural issues
- Development and presentation of programming for the community around multicultural and social justice issues, thus promoting an understanding of the impact of oppression on psychological development and well-being
Continued notice of "who's not in the room," or whose voice is not being represented in any given decision or project

Application of the values of empowerment and critical consciousness to teaching, research, committee involvements, and other activities

Collaboration with and support of faculty, staff, and students who are working toward goals of social justice that will benefit the entire college community

Requesting (and being responsive to) critical feedback

Relationship With the Civic Community:

- Development of partnerships that will allow us to collaborate with our civic neighbors in addressing local situations that involve ensuring psychological well-being and social justice

Steps Toward Implementing a Social Justice Framework

As mentioned previously, we are far from fully enacting this framework in the college's counseling service. It is a work in progress that will depend for its long-term success on collaboration with and input from other areas within the institution. Early signs regarding such potential collaborations have been promising: Recently, we were given the opportunity to summarize our ideas for a yearly divisional meeting; we subsequently received expressions of interest from several other departments in the division. Although this favorable response was gratifying and of itself, what was more important was that it represented an opportunity to partner with and learn from institutional colleagues as part of our developmental process. Our colleagues in other student service areas have impressive social justice commitments and expertise of their own, and working with them to bring structure and coherence to our mutual efforts helps each area to bring these initiatives to the foregound.

It is beyond the scope of this article to delineate completely the process by which our staff is creating and attempting to implement this framework. However, it is important to note that the process of planning, evaluating, and maintaining our efforts takes place at a number of levels, the most fundamental of which is interpersonal. We frequently devote staff meeting time to readings and training experiences in social justice, and we schedule a second weekly meeting specifically for discussing and planning social justice initiatives. Tension can characterize group discussions of social justice and multicultural issues, even among sincere, committed participants, and our staff has not been an exception in this area. Working through differences in perspective is an ongoing process, and discussing the sensitive issues involved (e.g., our own work with students, the ways we define such concepts as "therapist self-awareness," the impact that individual staff members have on each other) is essential, continuing work.

Another level involves transforming ideas into actual interventions and programming, and we have succeeded in implementing several elements of the framework.
One example is our stated intention to develop and present psychoeducational programming in the context of relevant sociocultural issues. Along these lines, we have offered well-attended lunchtime and evening presentations that explored the interface between mental health and social justice issues. For example, our “Lunchtime Mind Openers” consisted of a series of brown-bag lunches that featured invited speakers. Included in the series was Maureen Walker, from Wellesley (Massachusetts) College’s Stone Center. She presented “Voices From the Margin,” in which she juxtaposed her own experiences as a woman of color with those of a woman struggling with discrimination issues because of her mental illness. With these examples, she was able to illustrate the stigmatization of mental illness and the complex dynamics of oppression. Marcia Gillespie, the editor in chief of Ms. Magazine, addressed another lunchtime gathering, speaking on the power of one’s own voice and the importance of voice in women’s personal and professional development.

We believe strongly in our commitment to involve other members of the college community in planning and implementing our work, as stated in the guidelines. Toward this end, the results of our efforts include a rewarding, ongoing collaboration with the campus career development office. This partnership has produced, among other things, a panel presentation by lesbian alumnae who discussed issues of sexual orientation as related to the career search and interview process. Later, a similar panel discussion focused on women of color. With the goal of increasing our collaborations with students, we have implemented Imagine, a new grant program. Through the Imagine grant, we collaborate with student groups who propose to create events or programming to address personal development and social justice issues, and we have awarded the first of these to our campus’s LGBTQ student organization. Finally, we have also had the pleasure of sponsoring in-service workshops with nationally known experts in multicultural issues; we have invited staff members from other student-affairs-related offices on campus to attend these workshops. In the spring semester of 2001, our presenter was Thomas Parham, who spoke on Afrocentric approaches to counseling; in 2002, Michael D’Andrea presented a seminar on promoting social justice and mental health in the college setting.

It is likely that “Relationship With the Civic Community,” the final topic discussed under the heading “Implications for Practice” requires further explanation. Relationship with the civic community refers to our hope to eventually find ways, with the participation of the college, to serve and learn from the neighborhood that surrounds us and to thereby work against the notion of the college as an “ivory tower” within the community. This is not a new idea; the Chronicle of Higher Education recently published an article on the attempts of several urban universities to reach out to their communities as “equals, not oracles” (Van der Werf, 1999, p. 37). This might involve conducting collaborative research on topics that could benefit the college’s civic neighbors, establishing programs or outreach to some segment of the neighborhood, or helping to involve students in the same. Undoubtedly, there are serious constraints in realizing this goal; the most obvious one is that, like so many counseling centers, we face increasing student demand for
our services and currently can spare little staff time for ancillary projects. Nevertheless, our statement of goals is intended to be aspirational as well as pragmatic, so we have retained this ambitious objective within our guidelines.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that we also provide the familiar psychoeducational outreach programming that is typically associated with college counseling centers; these events provide important information to students about such concerns as depression, eating disorders, and stress. We consider the events to be important preventative interventions, and our interest in social justice does not diminish the value that we place on them or on other traditional services. At the risk of stating the obvious, we wish to emphasize that a social justice framework can give added dimension to such offerings, but it does not preclude them in any way; it also does not imply that our staff members are now expected to lecture every student they see in individual counseling on the psychological aspects of oppression and privilege. We believe that an awareness of the psychological effects of oppression and privilege can only enhance counseling practice, but social justice awareness and intention are to be applied within this model with the same care, flexibility, and exercise of clinical judgment as any other approach.

The ongoing creative process of developing a social justice framework is a challenging one, and it includes moments of uncertainty and tension as well as promise. The possibilities that this endeavor presents, however, are exciting: the prospect of articulating an approach to counseling practice that actually contributes, in a small way, toward “mak[ing] the world a better place” (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001, p. 396) and the opportunity to work against the risk of obsolescence that faces the counseling profession if it fails to address these issues (Hall, 1997).

References


