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*The Counseling Psychologist* 1996 24: 78

DOI: 10.1177/0011000096241003

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## A Multicultural Perspective on Principle and Virtue Ethics

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*The author proposes an alternative perspective on deriving ethical guidelines for psychologists. This proposal presents the position that in a pluralistic society, we cannot continue to derive moral imperatives from a Western civilization perspective. We need to develop strategies to arrive at a set of virtues or principles to guide our profession that address the diversity in the United States. Further, we need to take a similar approach in proposing ethical guidelines for an international, cross-cultural context. The article presents a paradigm shift in thinking among psychologists on how to function effectively in a pluralistic society and in a global economy.*

In reviewing the article by Meara, Schmidt, and Day (this issue), I was struck by two significant variables. First, the thorough attention to detail, the clarity of the authors' presentation, the systematic development of thoughts, and the excellent job of presenting both sides of the argument on both principle and virtue ethics. The major contribution presents information that we counseling psychologists must discuss and debate to arrive at a clearer perspective on our own values and beliefs and to achieve ethical, moral, and professional development. I accept the authors' premise that virtue ethics could provide an informed and possibly more culturally sensitive approach than principle ethics. Second, I was amazed by the power of socialization and the effect it has on our worldview, where, in spite of our high cognitive development (as evidenced by the authors' writing), we are unable to ask questions from any points of view in which we have not been socialized.

The authors valiantly struggled with the issues that they were investigating to present a better way to increase our ethical decision making. Yet it is preeminently clear that they are held imprisoned by Western civilization and its influence from Aristotle to Kant, to discussions of U.S. culture. The authors have addressed the multicultural nature of our society and its implications for psychologists. They have included a discussion of how cultural differences can result in damage to research participants, communities, or

students. The two examples, I believe, provide good information for individuals seeking to be more effective in multicultural contexts.

I believe that the authors have fallen prey to several blind spots to which our profession of psychology has been subject since its inception. This pertains to the cultural nature of every context. We have been socialized in the American psychology belief system that, because psychology is a science, it is objective. Therefore, the necessity of understanding contexts, beliefs, and values may not be relevant. We have come a long way from that earlier perspective, yet we have not come far enough. It still influences us—our thinking, and our research, teaching, and practice.

The authors accurately note that there is emerging scholarship in ethics and professional practice issues that addresses gender and cultural concerns. Obviously, the research has not influenced the mainstream culture of U.S. psychology. There are several reasons for this lack of understanding or lack of response. The most meaningful one is that we do not incorporate whatever is culturally and cognitively dissonant into our ongoing cognitive processes. What we need at the brink of the twenty-first century is a paradigm shift that brings cultural issues to the core of our profession from the periphery (Ibrahim & Arredondo, 1986). The current dialogue still accepts the class structure present in the United States between Euro-Americans and ethnic minorities. To complicate the picture further, we have the third wave of migration, which is 42% Latin and 41% Asian. How will these ethical practices translate to helping the new immigrants, who are mostly under the age of 21 and will be 50% of the workforce in the twenty-first century? (Ibrahim, 1992; Ibrahim & Duran, 1993; Kellogg, 1988).

Given the changing demographics of the United States, the global economy, and the technological advances that have led to the shrinking globe, we are forced to confront how we can come to a set of ethical assumptions that are pancultural and meet the criteria for all. U.S. psychology is not restricted to this nation only; it is marketed to the world because the United States is the leader in psychology. These perspectives demand an outlook that will enhance all that interacts with our knowledge base. As I noted earlier, we need a paradigm shift to address moral and ethical behavior in a cultural context.

## CULTURE AND MORAL OUTLOOK

All ethics is guided by one of three general perspectives: relativism, absolutism, or a dynamic universalism (Pedersen, 1995). The relativist position does not impose judgments on any position but, rather, tries to

comprehend the behavior within a cultural context (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992). Relativism can be divided into the following categories (Kierstead & Wagner, 1993): Relativism based on ethical egoism assumes that what is right for one person may not be right for another; relativism based on ethical nihilism presumes that there is no meaning to moral concepts; cultural relativism assumes that right or wrong are determined by the culture of the person involved. Pedersen states that relativism can make moral discourse difficult.

The absolutist position makes comparison across cultures under the assumption that all cultures *should* have the same moral-ethical outlook. There is no emphasis on cultural differences or cultures of various societies. The same ethical principles, virtues, or perspectives are applied to all people, societies, and nations under the premise that these are general guiding principles that all must accept. Cultural differences are perceived as “deficits” in the culture to which the theories, principles, or strategies are being applied. This is similar to the position taken by the British when they colonized India (Ibrahim, 1989). Differences were perceived as a lack of civilization, which was the White man’s burden to provide to the poor natives. If people did not agree or buy into the premises put forth by the British, then they were written off as less intelligent, dishonest, or wily. The same approach was taken toward native people of the United States. It was not until 1959 with the publication of Edward T. Hall’s book that anyone in the United States entertained the hypothesis that the Native Americans’ unwillingness to give up their culture, belief systems, and languages was because they already had a complex culture—in opposition to the settlers’ belief that they were “savages.” The absolutist position applies the same definition of reality to all cultural contexts.

The universalist position accepts that psychological processes are the same across cultures, yet it allows for the possibility that the manifestation of these processes will be different. This makes comparisons across cultures possible by distinguishing the manifestation of the psychological processes. Here, the application of psychological theories and measures and ethical guidelines requires an understanding of both the underlying similarities and differences (Berry et al., 1992). Pedersen (1995) states that both the absolutist and the relativist approaches provide easy answers—the absolutist by imposing one set of assumptions on all contexts, and the relativist by allowing each culture to generate its own answers. The logical path that would provide accurate answers is the universalist approach, according to Pedersen. The universalist position is much more complex and difficult. Yet it leads to the generating of ethical guidelines that are much more accurate by allowing each

group to manifest its cultural identity and to recognize the differences and the similarities.

### **PARADIGM SHIFT FROM MAINSTREAM TO A MULTICULTURAL SYSTEM OF MORALITY**

The first task in creating a new paradigm is to define *multicultural*, a term that is bandied about but whose meaning is not truly comprehended. To date, the term has been used in the U.S. context to identify the "other" cultures, namely, those that are not mainstream. Multicultural does not mean mainstream versus African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, or Native Americans. In the international context, it implies that the user is considering all cultures involved in the discussion. Further, the term implies the honoring of all systems or cultures. In a true multicultural society, all systems are respected. Order in the moral ethical domain is created by arriving at a common ground or shared worldview (Ibrahim, 1993) of what is right for that system. This order is derived from the ongoing systems of thinking and philosophy that govern the beliefs and values of everyone involved.

The question that arises as psychology faces this dilemma is, How can this be made possible in a real world as opposed to our ideal assumption of what is right? We have several frameworks that identify universal assumptions. If these frameworks are used, and we can identify the basic values and assumptions that guide moral ethical thinking of the groups involved, we can arrive at a common ground that will provide solutions for all. One caution here is that the common ground must be arrived at by the groups involved, not by the authority or power of the group that rules (by majority) the profession.

#### **Universal System of Assumptions**

I propose that we consider Clyde Kluckhohn's (1951) framework of universal value emphases and value orientations to chart out all the possible value systems in a specific society to understand the worldview of a society. Kluckhohn's paradigm allows for variations along five basic dimensions that undergird the value systems of societies. These five dimensions (Ibrahim, 1993) are as follows:

1. Human nature: Good, bad, or a combination of good and bad; this perspective also considers whether human nature is immutable or mutable.

2. Social relationships: Based on lineal-hierarchical, collateral-mutual, or individualistic belief systems.
3. Nature: A belief in the power of nature, in living in harmony with nature, or that nature can be controlled.
4. Time: A focus on the past, the present, or the future.
5. Activity: An emphasis on being spontaneous and taking each moment and day as it comes; on being-in-becoming, or considering spiritual/moral needs with success as evaluated by external standards; or doing, a focus on success as evaluated by external standards only at any cost.

Kluckhohn (1951) proposes that each group or society has a primary and a secondary value system for solving moral and social dilemmas. When the primary system does not offer a clear solution, people fall back on the secondary system to guide their thinking. Ibrahim and Owen (1994) found that within the northeastern U.S. White sample, there were four main systems of dealing with basic values. On an individual level, all who took the Scale to Assess World View (Ibrahim & Kahn, 1984) had a primary and a secondary value system to help them deal with the complex issues we face in life.

The values we hold define how our society functions. For example, in the United States, with the ideal of rugged individualism, many researchers and theorists maintain that society is set up to help each individual achieve his or her highest potential. Therefore, it is focused more on individual rights and goals than group rights or goals. In lineal-hierarchical systems, such as China or Japan, the greater good of the group is more important than the good of an individual. Ramirez (1991) has a scale to assess the socialization of individuals on this dimension of communalism or individualism called the Traditionalism-Modernism Inventory. These dimensions determine how our moral ethical dilemmas will be framed—for the good of society or the individual. The clash in these two ways of thinking, if not confronted, can cause much damage for professionals who are socialized in a particular system of thinking when the profession demands that they give up their primary values and accept those of the dominant group. This leads to feelings of anomie, alienation, and isolation for the professional who is culturally different.

The mainstream assumptions and values that govern our profession are derived from the white Anglo-Saxon value systems in which the founding fathers were socialized. Further, to make this fledgling nation succeed, the values that the founding fathers put forth for all to live by were extremely stringent. Takaki (1979) states that the founding fathers put themselves and every successive generation in “iron cages” to make the young nation a reality. I believe that the breakdown in the economy, our move from a manufacturing economy to a service economy, the floundering of values, the

intergenerational conflicts, and the degenerating race and ethnic relations in the United States are demanding a new order. The values of the founding fathers were useful and effective for that time in history. With civil rights, the women's movement, and the changing demographics of the United States, we need to conceptualize a moral social order that values all systems of thinking within the country and outside. It involves accepting that a change is necessary and finding a shared set of values and assumptions that will create a true multicultural society. This implies that all cultures in a society will be valued and honored. The common ground would be a shared worldview, a shared set of moral imperatives that will guide our society and our profession. We, as psychologists, can lead the way to a more peaceful society that truly encourages all people to be all that they can be within their cultural context.

### **Character Development in a Multicultural Society**

To facilitate character and moral development in a multicultural system, we have to identify all the moral ideals that each system subscribes to and find common ground. This common ground will provide the blueprint for ideal character development in a multicultural society. Character development requires ego development, moral development, and the communication skills necessary to function effectively in a pluralistic society (Whiteley, Bertin, Jennings, Lee, Magana, & Resnikoff, 1982). I have proposed a model for cultural and gender identity development that assists in both ego and moral development from a cultural perspective (Ibrahim, 1992, 1994). I believe such a model is ethical, because it provides psychological development from an individual's roots rather than from imposing a mainstream conception of a rights orientation on a culturally different person, which would lead to self-doubt, self-negation, and, consequently, a lower self-concept.

Whiteley et al.'s (1982) research on character development also focuses on communication skills to enhance ego and moral development, specifically, the skills of social perspective taking with empathy to understand the viewpoints of the culturally or socially different before passing judgment. Immediate judgments cut off all communication. Social perspective taking allows one to examine a foreign notion without passing judgment. The exercise of social perspective taking increases one's ability to see other perspectives and the rationale for those perspectives. It also allows people to increase their repertoire of knowledge. The communication skills needed in a pluralistic system demand behavioral flexibility (Pearson, Turner, & Todd-Mancillas, 1991), that is, the ability to communicate in several different ways

to understand the dynamics of communication in a multicultural system. Similar to counseling skills, behavioral flexibility requires that we suspend judgment and simply listen accurately to dissonant messages.

## CONCLUSION

Considering ethical perspectives and morality from a multicultural perspective implies that we strive toward a shared worldview on these issues. We can no longer function in a cultural vacuum or perpetuate the beliefs and values of mainstream United States. Neither can we afford to put forth assumptions as moral prerogatives that a majority of our constituents will not be able to accept. Continuing to function in this manner will lead to charges of cultural oppression. Further, demanding that all professionals in psychology subscribe to a Western model of morality, either a rights or a virtue orientation, may lead to severe psychological conflict for the professionals who are serving the public.

Beyond working toward a shared worldview, we need to focus on moral and ego development from a multicultural perspective. One model being tested that may prove to be useful is that of identity development from a cultural and gender perspective. Further, as professionals, we need to learn communication strategies that enhance our ability to arrive at a shared conception of moral issues. Strategies that may help in this process are social perspective-taking skills and behavioral flexibility in communication.

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