CULTURAL IDENTITIES AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE: ISSUES OF SUBJECTIVITY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

A Thesis Submitted to

The School of Social Work
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

McGill University, Montreal

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for
The Master's Degree in Social Work

by

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August, 1997

THE EAST INDIAN STORY

If we had eyes all over our body and could see in every direction,
there would still be one spot which we could not see. That would be the spot on
which we are standing. In order to see that,
we would need to step aside.

Author Unknown

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this thesis report has been a very demanding yet satisfying and rewarding experience for this author. The completion of this major project has been made possible thanks to the support, assistance, and cooperation of a variety of people who I am indebted to.

First of all, I would like to thank equally my faculty advisors Professors Linda Davies, and Peter Leonard for their knowledgeable guidance and assistance. Not only was it an educational pleasure to work with them, but also a personal delight. Secondly, I would like to give my regards to the School of Social Work administration staff, particularly Lillian Iannone, who were always willing to guide me in preparing the final drafts of this report. I would also like to give a special thank you to the social workers who participated in my research. Thank you for your honesty, sensitivity, and interest in this topic. Finally, I would like to thank my husband Lorin, and my mother Bonnie, for all their love and support during the completion of this paper, and during my academically demanding year in the School of Social Work.

Abstract

In this study, two parallel themes will be explored. One is the counsellor's understanding of their own cultural identity and how this affects their practice with people of similar or different cultures than their own. Secondly, the study attempts to discover counselling skills that are most useful in working with members of the non-dominant culture. Data was collected from eight participants using two interview formats - a semi-structured interview guide and an unstructured interview design. Examination of this data yielded the following major themes: issues of counsellor's self identity, client's perceptions of counsellors, common practice issues, and cultural matching of counsellor and client. Important insights about counsellor's cultural self-identity and its relationship to practice were presented. No definitive cross-cultural practice skills were articulated, although many strategies for working with difference were addressed.

Abstrait

Dans cette étude, deux thèmes parallèles ont été explorés. Un est la compréhension des conseillers sur leur propre identité culturelle et comment ceci atteint leur pratique avec des gens similaires ou d'une culture qui est différente de la leur. Deuxièmement, l'étude tente de découvrir les habilités des conseillers qui sont les plus utiles pour travailler avec les membres d'une culture non dominante. Une banque de données a été amassée en utilisant deux formats d'entrevue avec huit participants - une entrevue à demi structurée et un projet d'entrevue non structurée. L'examen de cette banque de données a produit les thèmes majeurs qui suivent: Les sujets de l'identité personnelle des conseillers, ce que les conseillers ont ressenti par rapport aux perceptions que leurs clients ont sur eux, le sujet de pratique commune, et l'égalité culturelle de conseiller et client. Un point de vue important a été présenté au sujet de l'identité personnelle des conseillers et leur lien avec la pratique. Aucune pratique définitive de contre-culture a été exprimé, malgré le fait que plusieurs stratégies de travail avec divergence ont été adressées.

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Cultural Identities and Cultural Difference:

Issues of Subjectivity and Social Work Practice

Introduction

Canadian society has greatly changed in the past ten to fifteen years, and is now characterized by numerous cultural and ethnic groups such as Asian, First Nations, East Indian, Black, Filipino, etc. As an example, recent population data prepared by United Way Research Services (1993), describes the demographic changes that the lower mainland of British Columbia has undergone in the past ten years. In 1992, immigrants represented 22.3% of the total provincial population, and 30% of the lower mainland population (United Way, 1993). Most immigrants to the province came from Asia, which accounted for 72.7% of the total in 1992, compared to 48% in 1981. In contrast, Europe was the source of 12% of all immigrants in 1992, compared to 31% a decade earlier. Of all new immigrants to the province, 82% were destined for the Vancouver area (United Way, 1993, p. 19). The Vancouver School Board now reports that 55% of children in the school system come from families where no English is spoken at home (Vancouver School Board, 1995). It is anticipated that this trend will continue putting additional pressures on the human service system to meet the needs of the ethnic minority clients. The Vancouver experience is typical of most large cities in Canada. In the face of this dramatic

change, it is imperative that social workers and social agencies look closely at how they are providing service, who they are serving, and more importantly who they are not serving.

My Eyes Are Open

As a social worker about to begin practising, I am aware of the need to develop cultural awareness, sensitivity, and skill in order to effectively serve a culturally diverse population. My interest in the area has been driven by a number of conflicting experiences I have had in my field work experience as well as in my personal life, which seem to be common to other professionals and social work practice in general. My social work field experiences opened my eyes to the gaps in services for people with languages other than English as well as cultural values and practices different from the traditional Western ways. In particular, during my practice in a transition house I observed the difficulties in working with women whose cultural healing practices were not incorporated into the agency's description of what it means to help. This made delivering effective service for these women extremely difficult if not impossible.

My life experiences have made me aware of the constant injustices and racist attitudes and behaviours people from cultural backgrounds other than Western heritage confront on a daily basis. A particular example of this 'awareness' occurred while watching a film which depicted the day-to-day struggles a Black man faced compared to his White friend. Both men came from similar backgrounds - same

education, economic situation, and current employment - yet each was treated completely different in daily life. The Black man was not rented an apartment, was charged over two thousand dollars more for a vehicle than his White friend, was not served in a shoe store, and was stopped by the police while walking down the street of an affluent neighbourhood. Although I was completely mortified by the obvious discrimination portrayed in this film, I felt this was the time when my naive little bubble burst and I was no longer able to hide behind the notion that people in Canada are all treated with respect and equality despite racial differences.

During my social work training and life experiences, I have expanded my understanding of difference and diversity through personal relationships with people who are different from me with respect to sexual orientation, life-style, socio-economic status, and ethnic origin. However, within the professional culture and the delivery of social services, there is a gap and a dissidence of fit that does not occur on a personal level. I have been witness to agency case records which reveal differential approaches and results in practice for minority clients. There is simultaneously an over representation of minority children and families in the more protective services such as child welfare and juvenile justice, but an under representation of ethnic clients in voluntary services such as family serving agencies, mental health centres, and parenting programs.

During the last ten years, there has been a gradual increase in the amount of research and training that addresses the needs of minority group members. From my experience, most social workers acknowledge the need to be culturally sensitive, but cultural sensitivity is like motherhood and apple pie. Few of us disagree with the need, but how do we translate this intention into effective practice? In the literature, multicultural competence has typically been synonymous with cultural sensitivity, but the specific ways in which cultural sensitivity practices could be developed and applied have received comparatively little attention. There is a lack of specificity regarding specific counselling strategies that are most useful in working with clients of minority cultures. At the same time, there is a questioning of the validity of current theories, techniques, and strategies used by social workers with minority clients. There has been little effort to study the work of counsellors doing this type of work, or to study their own experiences, challenges, conflicts and growth in developing effective interventions. A recognition of the value of this experience has led to this investigation. It is with the hope that I will be able to incorporate this learning into my own practice and develop a clearer understanding of how to decrease the void created by difference.

Setting The Stage

In any study of cross-cultural practice, it is important to define the terms and outline how they will be used in setting the parameters of this investigation. Pedersen (1978), has described cross-cultural counselling as including almost all differences.

> *If we consider the value perspectives of age, sex role, life style, socioeconomic status and other specific affiliations as cultural, then we may well conclude that all counselling is to some extent cross-cultural.* (p. 480)

However, for the purposes of this study, the cross-cultural focus is on the interactions between people who have similar and different cultural backgrounds. Here, culture refers to, *"patterns of learned behaviour and values that are shared among members of a group, are transmitted to group members of one group from another"* (Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism, 1994). Although this term can refer to the broader categories included in Pedersen's definition (1978), the study primarily centres on ethnicity which includes common language, nationhood, and ancestry. Ethnic group refers to a group of individuals who choose to associate and promote their organization as a group on the basis of shared ancestry and history.

These terms sometimes obscure the classification of groups by race. **Race** is a classification of people based on genetic characteristics, such as skin colour, that was historically used by Europeans to justify their belief in White supremacy. Although this construct is now scientifically discredited, it is a concept that affects the lives of all Canadians who are seen as belonging to **visible minorities**. **People of colour** *"...refers to those people whose ostensible ancestry is at least in part, African, Asian, Indigenous, and/or combinations of these groups"* (Helms, 1995, p. 188). According to Helms (1995), **White people** are those *"who self identify or are commonly identified as belonging exclusively to the White racial group regardless of*

the continental source (e.g. Europe, Asia) of that racial ancestry" (p. 189).

Mainstream pertains to the dominant culture or groups which in Canada are those of French or European background. **Mainstream organizations** related to any organized body of human service providers which has served the traditionally dominant population.

There are two parallel themes that will be explored in this thesis. One is the counsellor's understanding of their own cultural identity and how this affects their practice with people of similar or different cultures than their own. Secondly, the study attempts to discover counselling skills that are most useful in working with cultural minority clients. The next chapter is a review of what is means to work 'cross-culturally' from a Western framework, and to examine obstacles and barriers which may present themselves in 'culturally sensitive' social work practice.

CHAPTER II :

Working Cross-Culturally:

A Review of the Literature

Introduction

This review is undertaken to look at the major ideas and beliefs that have shaped working cross-culturally in social work practice. Over the last decade there has been a great deal written about cross-cultural social work. This review is limited to those

considered ethnically different from the mainstream would fit into the category of "visible minority". This category reflects racial characteristics that are different from those of individuals who belong to the dominant 'White' culture.

While immigrants of European ancestry have the choice to assimilate into mainstream culture in one or two generations because they are considered racially similar to those of British origin, immigrants of Asian, African, Chinese and Indian ancestry often continue to be placed in the category of visible minority, regardless of how many generations their families have resided in Canada. This is a reality that bears on the questions in this study and affects people's views of themselves.

Racial Discourse

It seems impossible to speak about issues pertaining to culture and ethnicity without being clear about the history of racial discourse. In any discourse about issues of race there are always some who say that race should not matter, does not matter, and that we should be talking about culture instead. This belief seems to be that it is cultural differences that create a lack of understanding, not differences of colour. The idea is that if we really understood each other we would not discriminate against each other. This ignores the political and economic reality of people who hold a minority position in terms of decision-making and opportunities in our society.

Since the time of colonization, the concept of race has been used to label people who are visibly different from the Europeans. The idea of race became primarily a European category, and later a Western one. From a European political

viewpoint, the subject peoples were always considered to be different and inherently inferior races.

Ignoring this reality and not speaking about it has been addressed in the analysis of the history of racial discourse developed by Frankenburg(1993). She talks about three discourses on race that have developed historically in North America, but which co-exist today. These are essentialist racism, colour blindness or colour evasiveness, and race cognizance. The discourse on essentialist racism has been predominant in modern Western history. It promoted the idea of race as constituting basic biological differences among people which then allowed White people to claim biological superiority. This justified inequalities in political or economic power, and even slavery.

The idea of colour blindness gained popularity in the 1920's. Race came to be spoken of in cultural and social terms. The idea of ethnicity displaced race as the politically correct term. Within this new paradigm, ethnicity came to be understood more behaviourally than biologically. This made for an assimilation analysis of what should happen to people of colour in North America. They would assimilate, and a levelling based on merit would be achieved. Underlying this belief is the idea that what happens to people belonging to visible minorities has nothing to do with the society in which they live (which espouses that all people are the same), but rather with their own merit and abilities. Although this change in thinking may have provided the moral force behind the civil rights movement, it promoted the idea of colour

blindness which Frankenburg (1993) has renamed as *"colour evasiveness or power evasiveness"* (p.14) This discourse suggests that we are all born equal; we are all the same under the skin; we are all converging culturally; and we all have the same chance to succeed.

Race cognizance was born out of the radical anti-racist movements of the early 60's and late 70's which again focused on difference. In this shift in thinking, difference signals autonomy of culture, values and world view. Along with it arose an analysis and critique of racial inequality as a fundamental structuring feature of our society. Frankenburg also says that all three discourses about race exist alongside each other today and that colour evasiveness with its assimilation analysis is still dominant (pp.13-15).

In Canada, the popular discourse for the last twenty-five years has been one of multiculturalism. An official federal government multiculturalism policy was declared by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971. This paradigm would seem to relate to the colour evasiveness discourse as it ignores the issue of unequal access to opportunities based on racial origin. The reality may be that multiculturalism, in its inability to address political and economic concerns of people from minority cultures, puts a new face on colour blindness. For example, Europeans, Blacks, and First Nations people have all been seen as having unique cultures represented by their "folk" customs, food, and arts. "Real" Canadians are believed to have a neutral culture or no culture, just as the White race is seen as neutral or as having no colour.

'being Canadian', in that we are all Canadians. These terms maintain the view that multiculturalism is special treatment for some people and denies the reality that multiculturalism is everyone.

The term ethnicity is often used to replace the term race or racial difference. In reality, the concept of race incorporates such things as ethnic community, ethnic identity, ethnic group, ethnic minority. An ethnic social entity is defined not by its supposed racial characteristics, but rather by its social, economic and cultural features (p.15).

An ethnic community, in reality, is a dynamic social unit which shares a sense of heritage, historical background and is continually changing. As a dynamic social unit it may over time lose one or more of its major characteristics such as language or religion. The ethnic community is more or less distinct, but represents a mixture of ideologies which may be seen as a "way of life." In this sense the community has a culture, but the community is not the individuals themselves.

Ethnic identity is therefore not a fixed and absolute state, but is rather part of a process that may develop toward full ethnic consciousness. However, not all the peoples of a given community have the same relations, either inside or outside the group, nor do they have the same degree of ethnic identity. Similar to all social groups, there will always be a core group that maintain overall community cohesion, respecting all or most of the ethnic differentiation, while others may disregard the boundaries and leave the group affiliation (p.16). Despite ethnic and racial similarities

can be conceived of as having several stages. Helms revised this model and put forward the idea that *"statuses"* would better describe the interactive nature of stages of development. In other words, individuals sometimes operate out of one stage of development and sometimes out of another depending on the socio-racial situation they are facing and what has proven in the past to be the most adaptive way of dealing with it. According to Helms, the ways in which White people progress through these stages are different from those of people of colour in that,

> *As a consequence of growing up and being socialized in an environment in which members of their group (if not themselves personally) are privileged relative to other groups, Whites learn to perceive themselves (and their group) as entitled to similar privileges. In order to protect such privilege, individual group members...learn to protect their privileged status by denying and distorting race-related reality status quo. Consequently healthy identity development for a White person involves the capacity to recognize and abandon the normative strategies of White people for coping with race. (p. 188)*

For people of colour, on the other hand, *"overcoming internalized societal racial stereotypes and negative self and own group conceptions is a major component of racial identity development"* (p.189). So while all people are located somewhere on a continuum of racial identity development, as it is manifested in their relationships with those belonging to different racial groups, the process is somewhat more complicated for those belonging to visible minorities. They must contend with developing relatedness to the dominant group as well as to the racial/ethnic group with which

they identify, or to which they have been assigned by mainstream society (Sodowsky, Kwan, and Pannu, 1995).

The development of racial identity is somewhat complicated as well for bi-racial or bi-cultural individuals. Some people are likely to experience different degrees of racial discrimination from White society depending on their racial composition. This affects their status of racial identity as they attempt to identify with two or more racial heritages, while perhaps being identified by mainstream society as belonging only to one. Keerdoja (1984, in Kerwin and Ponterotto, 1995) noted that *"children of White Asian or White Hispanic backgrounds assimilate more easily into White society than do children of Black White unions, who, no matter what their percentage of Black heritage is or how light skinned they may be, are assigned to the Black community"* (p.200).

The Bi-Cultural Imperative

The participants in this study represent a diverse group of counsellors who have been dealing with diversity issues for years. They are at different places in their own professional development, their own comfort with acculturation, and their own understanding of power and privilege. However, because of the client populations they serve and the colleagues they work with, all the minority or mainstream participants are struggling with issues of bi -culturalism. Ben Camiol (1987) asserts that the person of another culture living inside the boundaries of a dominant culture is only the expert on the difference between the two cultures because they are the ones

> *When an organization hires a multicultural worker to meet the needs of the changing population, the worker is expected to conform to pre-existing services, rules and procedures. The only difference is that the worker primarily serves ethnically diverse clients, thus the function of the worker is to apply the existing services to this target population, simply by personally bridging language and cultural gaps.* (p.10)

Euro-centric Methods of Providing Service

The status of the counselling profession is being contested today by minority and feminist practitioners who have appealed to the profession to re-examine and reevaluate the theory and practice base of counselling and other helping professions (Katz, 1985). Although it is acknowledged that clients are affected by environment and culture, many counsellors continue to be unaware of the fact that the profession has at its core an inherent set of cultural values and norms by which clients are judged. The practice of counselling and the data base that underlies the profession is not morally, politically, and ethnically neutral (Sue and Sue, 1990, p. 36).

Collins (l989) points out that *"all social thought...reflects the interests and standpoint of its creators"* (p.750). She goes on to say, *"Experts represent specific interests and credentialing processes, and their knowledge claims must satisfy the epistemological and political criteria of the contexts in which they reside"* (p.750). It would follow that counselling and social work concepts predominantly reflect the interests and standpoint of White middle class society since the early architects of the helping professions came out of an intellectual base in the universities and a charitable base in the non-profit agencies.

Waldegrave (as referred to in Law, 1994) suggests that concepts deeply embedded in Western ways of thinking about problems, have been presented in academic institutions as international and intercultural ways of therapy. For instance the importance placed on individuality over communal type thinking, or the belief in the "sacredness" of social science knowledge, as opposed to other forms of religious faith, are ways in which we have been schooled. Models of service built on these and other elements of a "commonly" held world view may not be relevant to those who come from a different culture and therefore construct their world differently. What we have learned in universities is naturally reflected in the thinking of administrators of mainstream organizations when attempting to provide services to a community that is ethnically and racially diverse.

This may or may not be true of counsellors whose cultures are rooted in a different paradigm than that of the Western world, even if they have been students of Western universities. They may wish to provide service in a different way than is seen to be beneficial by the mainstream. According to Fong and Gibbs (1995), they are more often asked to implement programs already in place, rather than design them. It may be important for supervisors and administrators to acknowledge that they have to learn from their employees regarding culturally appropriate methods of service.

World View Orientations

An understanding of world views is relevant to any cross-cultural counselling. It has become increasingly clear that many minority persons hold world views different from members of the dominant culture. A world view can be defined as how a person perceives his/her relationship to the world. Ibrahim (1985, as reported in Sue & Sue, 1990) describes world views as *"one's conceptual framework"*, and is closely related to a person's cultural upbringing. World views affect how we think, make decisions, behave, and define life. World view is very much related to racism and a subordinate position in society, which has relevance to this study. Counsellors who hold a world view different from their clients may, through unawareness, engage in cultural oppression.

One of the most useful frameworks for understanding difference was developed by Kluckholm and Strodbeck (1961). This model assumes that there exists a set of core dimensions that are pertinent to all people of all cultures. The value orientation model postulates that all people develop values around four life experiences. These are outlined on the chart below.

Dimensions	*Value Orientations*		
1. *Time Focus* What is the temporary focus of human life?	*Past* The past is important Learn from history.	*Present* The present moment is everything. Don't worry about tomorrow.	*Future* Plan for the future. Sacrifice today for a better tomorrow.

2. *Human Activity* What is the modality of human activity?	*Being* It's enough to just be.	*Being & In-Becoming* Our purpose in life is to develop our inner` self.	*Doing* Be active. Work hard and your efforts will be rewarded.
3. *Social Relations* How are human relationships defined?	*Lineal* Relationships are vertical. There are leaders & followers in this world.	*Collateral* We should consult with friends/family when problems arise.	*Individual-istic* Individual autonomy is important. We control our own destiny.
4. *People/Nature Relationships* What is the relationship of people to nature?	*Subjugation to Nature* Life is largely determined by external forces (God, fate)	*Harmony With Nature* People and nature co-exist in harmony.	*Mastery Over Nature* Our chall-enge is to conquer and control nature.

It is this type of value differences that have been neglected in the counselling field. This neglect may be for sociopolitical reasons (Sue & Sue, 1990, p.140). What is important is that counsellors understand the basis of their own world view and to accept and understand the legitimacy of others. Like many other dynamic processes, world view is not a static entity and changes with growth, experience, and interaction.

A cautionary note must be added to this schema. It should be kept in mind that Kluckholm and Strodbeck developed schema in 1961. The far right hand column, which represents the most Western orientation, expresses White male dominant values. These are now challenged by minority groups, those who were previously

These findings provide support for the recruitment, training, and hiring of ethnic minority counsellors. Fong and Gibbs (l995) also quote a body of literature that suggests that clients make greater use of mental health services when the services employ staff of ethnic backgrounds similar to the clients.

Language is perhaps the most obvious barrier to service, indicating that an intimate familiarity with a particular culture is essential to the process of making services available. Language is sometimes underestimated as a cultural reality, and in so doing underestimating the extent that culture, meaning world view and values, is preserved and transmitted through language. It is possible that without being fluent in a language that one does not have meaningful access to the culture of those who speak the language. This is an issue that is reported on by counsellors in the study.

Organizational Change Initiatives

Atkinson and Lowe (l995) found that one of the recommendations that arises repeatedly in multicultural counselling literature is that more ethnic counsellors, who presumably are bilingual or are familiar with ethnic cultural values, should be recruited. It may be, however, that the decision to diversify service staff in any organization only happens when it has become clear that whole segments of the population are not making use of the services provided, and when funding becomes available for multicultural services.

> *The development of the welfare state has meant that a majority of social workers are employed in bureaucratic institutions funded, at least in part, by taxpayers. As government employees, workers and their boards are socialized to be accountable to various levels of government. Thus, remaining "in business" does depend on satisfying budgetary and policy requirements established for specific services (McNicoll and Christensen, 1996, p.144)*

In 1992, in an effort to provide services to a changing population, Family Services of Greater Vancouver, began an anti-racist and multicultural organizational change process. This was a far reaching organizational change effort to undertake a review of all areas of the agency; structure, employment equity, decision-making, service delivery, philosophy, etc.

There are two primary goals that drive this change effort. One is to make the agency's services more accessible to all members of the population. Secondly, employment equity is a goal in itself. The multicultural organizational committee was ratified and supported by the Board and the senior management staff. The agency is struggling with change and diversity issues with the aim of achieving the stated mission "diversity is the culture of the agency".

One cannot ignore the role that funding sources have played in promoting organizational change. Minority communities have pressured funding sources for their share of resources, and mainstream organizations were aware that if they did not respond funding would be in jeopardy. One wonders if this would have occurred without the pressure of diverse constituents and threats to loss of funding.

A complaint often heard from non-mainstream workers is that within the agency they reflect the minority status of their clients and are often in entry level positions without power or status. Morrison, (l992) in evaluating the experiences of l6 major US organizations in their attempt to diversify, concludes that there are many ways to achieve this end, and in reality the process remains a mystery. She stresses the need to discover, solve, and rediscover diversity problems. The process is ongoing and there is no final point of completion.

A Lack of Qualified Professionals

One of the often cited barriers to hiring more ethnically and culturally diverse staff is the lack of formally qualified professionals. Members of minority communities often require, or desire, workers with language skills. The issue of certification arises if the staff have cultural and language skills but no formal social work training. This requires an agency who will commit to professional development of their staff, and place value on credentials other than those of the traditional educational process. The advancement of non formally qualified staff in agencies has been challenged by those who have formal qualifications, and it is a contentious issue that is the cause of backlash.

A Gap In The Literature

Although touched upon in the research related to cross-cultural counselling (Cook & Helms, 1988, Leong & Chou, 1994) and on the practice of hiring multi-cultural professionals (Gutierrez, 1992, Fong & Gibbs, 1995), I have not found a study

the way in which they work. This qualitative approach is compatible with social work practice in that the process is open-ended, contextually based, and focused on day to day work. *"'Use of self', a familiar social work precept, is also common to both practice and research since the investigator and the practitioners alike are the inductive instruments who, through the process of interpretation, discover and generate meaning"* (Goldstein, 1994, p. 44).

In this study, I, the researcher, have taken a position commonly underlying feminist research. That is, that there is a respect for lived experience, the subjective narratives given by the informants are as important as objective facts, and that the particular world view or personal philosophy of the informant is valued and worthy of attention.

Feminist standpoint theory, as outlined by Swigonski (1993), has influenced the theoretical framework for this research. This framework recognizes the issue of power and position. We live in a society that is ordered hierarchically. There really is no possibility of a disinterested, objective viewpoint (Harding, 1991). We all have our place on the social map which affects the perspective from which we view the world, and are viewed by others. This place we hold in the social hierarchy affects how much power, in terms of access to resources, credibility, and status we have. Swigonski (1993) views the standpoint theory as follows:

> *A standpoint is a social position. From that social position certain features of reality come into prominence and other aspects of reality are obscured. From a particular social standpoint, one can see some things more clearly than others. Standpoints involve a level of conscious awareness about two things: a person's location in the social structure, and that location's relationship to the person's lived experience.* (p.g. 10)

It is the later part, *"that location's relationship to the person's lived experience"*, connects to this thesis most directly. I was able to link this theory with my research because I was interested in exploring the personal experiences of counsellors working cross-culturally within an agency, and how this work is similar or different from counsellors working with the dominant mainstream client. Many of the counsellors I interviewed felt isolated in the agency and alone with cross-cultural work. They expressed a sense of relief in knowing that others who stand in the same social location share their struggles. Also, as the agency undergoes a process of multicultural organizational change, ethnic workers wondered about their position and status in the agency. Do others see them as working with their own community, or with any client? How many of their issues relate to organizational and societal structures?

Access to Agency

The ability for me to gain access to the agency in order to carry out my research was based on the fact that I have worked as a summer student in the agency for the past four years. I have been involved with other qualitative studies for several departments and have the support of agency administrators. I approached

Under the impetus of the organizational change committee, the agency has made significant gains in establishing a more representative and ethnically diverse staff. The staff which make-up the Family Advancement program, where the research was carried out, is the most diverse in the agency.

In 1990, the agency was asked by the Ministry for Children and Families to deliver a school based social work program aimed at early intervention. The program provides family counselling to families who are self-referred, or identified as "at risk" by schools, the Ministry for Children and Families, and other community agencies. The twelve schools identified for service were all in the inner city of Vancouver. A visit to each school by myself, quickly revealed a demographic shift that had seen working class 'mainstream' families moving to the suburbs, and new immigrant populations now making up the majority of the school population. The general school statistics indicate that 55 percent of school children in Vancouver report that the language in their homes is other than English (Vancouver School Board, 1995). The agency recognized the necessity of diversifying their staff and service delivery to accommodate the language and cultural needs of these families. The staff of this program represent the following ethnic and cultural backgrounds - Chinese, Latin American, First Nations, Cambodian, Vietnamese, European, and Canadian. The twelve counsellors represent a diversity of lived experiences ranging from relatively recent refugee status to third generation Canadian culture. Eight counsellors speak more than one language. The program is recognized for its multicultural focus,

including the bilingual ability and cultural knowledge of its staff. Despite the development of a team which is exceptionally rich in diverse perspectives, knowledge, and skill, there has been no evaluation of the specifics of their practice.

Within Family Services, as in many other social service agencies, cross-cultural competence has been promoted through various methods. Workshops and training programs have aimed at increasing staff awareness of diversity and racism. Ethno-specific interventions have been promoted through hiring staff that match cultural backgrounds of clients. Organizational policies and practices have been reviewed in order to remove, as much as possible, cultural bias. To further its multicultural organizational goals, FSGV undertook research that would specifically focus on counselling experiences of social workers as they provided service to clients of same and different cultural backgrounds.

The research project the agency was carrying out focused primarily on cross-cultural counselling skills. Thirteen counsellors were interviewed by three interviewers using a semi-structured interview guide. The guide is outlined below. It is important to note that the style of the three interviewers varied, and the directive versus non-directive or open-ended approaches differed depending on the particular style of the interviewer. A review of the transcripts indicated that the participants focused on what they considered to be important issues, and at times deviating from the topics introduced by the interviewers. As one of the interviewers following this interview guide, I also found that it was difficult to keep to the guide as the discussion

progressed. Lofland and Lofland's (1995) description of an interview guide proved to be the case in this interviewing situation.

> *...a guide is not a tightly structured set of questions to be asked verbatim as written, accompanied by an associated range of pre-worded likely answers. Rather, it is a list of thing to be sure to ask about when talking to the person being interviewed.* (p. 85)

Although this guide outlines detailed questions to be asked, there was a tendency to allow the participants to guide the interview and focus on the issues that they saw as important. Because of this, there were many areas of similarity and revealing of self that occurred in the structured interview that I used with the four additionally selected participants.

Interview Guide with Counsellor

Counsellor Data:	Client Data:
Ethnicity:	Ethnicity:
1st Language:	1st Language:
Age: Gender:	Age: Gender:
Education:	Education:

1. Describe how this client was referred to you.

    Who made the referral?

    What was the stated problem?

    How serious was the problem thought to be?

    What were you expected to do about this?

With what other agencies/organizations and or professionals did you intercede on behalf of the client?

What kind of information did you provide for the client?

In what way did you consider it necessary to educate the client?

What other family members did you engage? In what way? How was this influenced by the client's culture? By your culture?

What other members of the client's community did you involve? In what ways?

6. Describe your manner of communication with the client. (E.g. amount of eye contact, amount of direct confrontation, use of silence, use of gestures or actions to communicate warmth or respect) Were these influenced by culture - yours and/or the client's?

7. To what extent did you discuss the ethnicity/culture of the client? Your own cultural background?

8. To what extent did you discuss the client's beliefs about the issue? Was this discussion influenced by the client's or your own culture?

9. Discuss specific cultural traits that impinge on counselling such as fatalism, superstition, lack of long-term planning, reluctance to self-disclose, strong sense of family obligation, noninterference in lives of others require adjustments by counsellors. To what extent were these, or other similar traits evident in your work with this client? How did you handle these matters?

10. Describe the termination or present status with the client? What has been the duration and frequency of contact? Has this been influenced by the client's ethnicity?

11. Describe your own reactions to working with this client.

How was this effected by your cultural similarity or difference?

Did you feel hampered by you lack of knowledge of the client's culture? If so, what did you do?

Relationship to Research Topic

This thesis topic grew out of the original agency research. My perspective is different in that the focus is more on the counsellors as the subject of the research, how they view their work, and what their perception is of cross-cultural work, hence the title "*Cultural Identities and Cultural Difference: Issues of Subjectivity and Social Work Practice*". In reading the transcripts of the two projects, the agency's and my own, the similarity of topics, discussion, and descriptions were evident. For my thesis, I conducted eight interviews. Four interviews were carried out specifically for the thesis, and the other four were also part of the agency study. All eight interviews will be analysed and used for the purpose of this report.

Sampling Design

The original plan had been to base my research on the agency's material gained from the interviews of all program staff. However, through discussion with my research advisors, and re-evaluation of the intent of the agency study, the decision was made to interview four additional participants in a more open-ended format.

be about two hours in length and that I hoped to gain insight into their individual struggles and challenges in cross-cultural work.

Research Site

The research for this study was carried out in two locations: within the counsellor's offices at F.S.G.V., and in the homes of the counsellors I was interviewing. Five social workers were interviewed at their place of work and three at their homes. The interviews in individual homes offered opportunities for a more relaxed interviewing process. The interviews took place outside of working hours, there was less time pressure, and tape recording was less onerous. In the offices, the air conditioning system interfered with the sound recording and there was additional interference of telephones and pressure to move on to the next task of the day. I also felt that the interviews conducted off site allowed for the highest level of confidentiality.

Data Collection

Before the actual interview began, I reviewed with the respondents the purpose of the interview, stating that the material was for my MSW thesis and would only be used for that purpose. I again reiterated that I was interested in an account of their experience of their work, issues, challenges and dilemmas in cross-cultural practice. I informed the counsellors that I had gained agency permission to carry out these interviews and would adhere to the research policy of the agency. I asked permission to tape-record and transcribe the interviews. I informed the participants that direct

verbatim quotes would be used to illustrate certain points, but that these would not be attributed to particular individuals. I addressed the issue of confidentiality by saying that all names and identifying information would be removed from the transcripts for the submission of the thesis. I also asked permission to allow my faculty advisors to see the interviews and discuss the contents with me. I informed the counsellors that the tapes and transcripts would be destroyed once the thesis was submitted. All interviewees gave verbal consent for me to use the material for my MSW thesis.

The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcriber was hired from a professional typing agency.

A review of the transcripts indicated that counsellors talked more openly and enthusiastically on the areas which were more self and relationship focused, e.g. *"How did your cultural background influence your work with the client?, How did you engage the client?, and, How do you define your professional role with the client?".*

The data collection therefore consists of the four interviews I did for the agency's study, plus the four interviews I carried out only to be used for my thesis.

For four of the counsellors, an unstructured interview format was used so that participants would be able to define the most important issues to them. Only three major questions and a number of questions to "fall back on" were prepared. It was important for me to allow the conversation to evolve in its own direction so that participants could formulate and express ideas as the conversation developed. As

Rationale For Method Chosen

There were several reasons for adopting this approach to the research. The primary reason was to include a diverse number of participants so that a wide range of perspectives could be included. I wanted the research to include people who were relatively new to the country as well as "mainstream" Canadian social workers. I had originally only intended to use the four participants who were interviewed outside the agency study. I felt that the format might provide a greater depth of discussion. However, the larger sample allows for more varied input and a greater opportunity for finding patterns of interactions.

Open-ended interviewing was used in order to gain the point of view of the subjects. Initially, I experienced concerns that I may lose control and not be able to focus the conversation. Then it occurred to me that the fear of losing control might be a reflection of always being able to maintain control by virtue of the counselling relationship and my memberships in White mainstream society. I decided that as I made a commitment to having the participants define the issues of importance in the study, this was an appropriate area in which to give up control. As addressed above, unstructured interviews were chosen so that participants could define what issues were most pressing for them.

Description of Participants

In order to protect confidentiality, the group will be described in general terms in order that identities remain obscured.

Age: The eight participants range in age from thirty-one to forty-five.

Gender: Seven of the eight interviewed are women.

Employment: All subjects have full-time employment with F.S.G.V. Length of employment ranges from one to seven years.

Country of Origin: Two counsellors are Euro-Canadian, two are South Asian, one is Vietnamese, one is Chinese, and two are Latin American. Two of the counsellors arrived as refugees, and one immigrated to Canada as a child.

Education: Both Euro-Canadian counsellors have M.S.W.s, two of the visible minority counsellors have M.S.W.s, and two counsellors have B.S.W.s. One participant is an art therapist, and another was a teacher in her country of origin and has completed two years of community college counselling training.

Relationship to the Researched

Initially, I had doubts about doing this research. I wondered how a White mainstream researcher would be viewed by the participants. My doubts were based on the notion that a great deal of research has been done by those of the dominant culture on ethnic minority communities in which these people have gained very little from the research being conducted. I did not want to set-up expectations that could not be fulfilled, nor did I wish to emphasize cultural differences one more time. These anxieties diminished as a relationship of interest and trust between the participants and myself were established.

My anxieties were increased in the original selection period as one candidate accepted my volunteer proposition and then withdrew. This candidate who withdrew is from an ethnic background other than Canadian or European. Her explanation was that she was prepared to talk about her clients, but she herself was not willing to be the subject of the research. This individual recognized that I held a different position than those I would be inviting to participate, and this could affect the openness of conversation surrounding issues of race and privilege. Although I was a student who was not employed by the agency, I had in the past worked on a special contract basis for two agency administrators. There was concern that I may have more direct access to administrators thereby holding more power within the agency.

I was appreciative that this counsellor voiced these opinions, as I then was able to bring them up with other volunteers. This situation made me more aware of my position as an outside researcher and forced me to address issues of safety, power, and confidentiality with other participants. Those that participated seemed thankful of the opportunity to discuss their work with an interested party, and articulated that this issue of place and power was not an issue for them. My position was one of a learner, someone who had enough experience to 'hear' what was said, and a participant who wished to add to the knowledge base of cross-cultural work.

Dilemmas and Uncertainties

The major dilemma I faced in carrying out this research is outlined in the above section regarding the woman who withdrew from the research. I was additionally

concerned that these interviews would not reveal material of any substance that would shed light on the topic. I was also concerned about maintaining a non-judgemental stance. In my own practice, I have struggled with the issue of how to be an advocate for marginalized groups when you yourself are not a member of that group. In this particular situation, I did not want to take a position, but rather adopt an attitude of inquiry and listener. As I began to evaluate the interviews, I became more comfortable with the values of the dialogues and their importance for social work practice.

Method of Data Analysis

After the interviews, each was transcribed, and notes were recorded about some of the salient features of the interviews. Comments from my advisors were incorporated into these notes. This was the beginning of the analytic process. After the audio tapes were transcribed, I read the transcripts while listening to the tapes, and corrected words that were misunderstood or deleted.

In an attempt to bring order to the transcript data, segments of the text were arranged in a series of categories with headings that indicated the meaning of each category. This reflects the grounded theory approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Similar experiences were noted in each interview, coded, and organized under similar themes and concepts. In analysing each interview, I focused on understanding each counsellor's situation and testing to see if the findings from one situation were relevant to material from other interviews. It became evident that

there were general clusters or topics common to each interview. These topics were arranged into larger themes that would shed light on the research question. Examination of the categories yielded the following major themes:

1) Self-Identification of Counsellor and Client

2) Bridging Western and Non-Western Views

3) Client/Counsellor Matching

These major themes are further separated into sub-themes in the body of the research analysis.

CHAPTER IV :

Narratives of Cultural Differences & Similarities

A review of the interviews indicate that there are a number of common themes and issues surrounding how we as social service providers work with cultural similarity and difference. Although the focus of this thesis is on cultural difference and similarity, much of the analysis could apply to other types of difference and diversity, and challenges us as social workers to continually re-evaluate our own thinking, frameworks, and practice techniques.

Reflections on the Counsellor's Self-Identity

Data from the interviews support professional literature (Atkinson, 1986; Helms, 1995; Leong & Chou, 1994) which claims that cultural self-identification is

> *One point that I would like to emphasize is that I don't consider that I have any client that is really from my current culture, only some aspects and I want to emphasize that because, yes, it is very challenging. I cannot relate culturally to some of these lifestyles.*

In this instance, the counsellor was referring to her own conflicting values. Her client has been involved in extra marital affairs, had children from several different men, and was espousing values of female independence common in North American culture. The counsellor herself was strongly connected to her traditional root. This raises the question of the counsellor's relationship to their own cultural identity. Perhaps the counselling relationship requires some distance from our own culture in order that we may understand another.

This issue of acceptance of one's cultural identity, and a distance which allows for a non-defensive stance was evident in an interview with a White counsellor who worked with many different minority groups. In discussing her Euro-Canadian background she explained,

> *When we discuss racism or privilege people get really uptight. Yet we are all racist, it is part of being White. Because I'm a racist doesn't mean that I am a bad person or that I can't change things. I think sometimes we just get so defensive that we can't get past racism. I think that being able to discuss racism with your clients or colleagues is very healthy because you become informed, you become more aware and you start to change.*

This openness to acknowledging differences in power and privilege is essential in understanding the dynamics of the relationship between the client and the counsellor.

This would be difficult to do if one was reactive or defensive about the position of their own cultural group.

A Chinese social worker who serves a large school attached to Vancouver's Chinatown explains her struggle in dealing with difference and similarity within her racial group.

> *I am Chinese, from Hong Kong. But I would probably say every Chinese in Vancouver right now can be so different because of the different places they come from. If people are Chinese but from Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or have grown up in Canada they can be so different. A lot of times I have to tell myself to really go back to the basics of being a social worker like self determination and to be with the clients where they are.*

Like many mainstream agencies, the agency where this study was carried out has attempted to be responsive to the demographic changes in the city by hiring staff with cultural and language skills. However, these comments from the staff interviewed supports the view that cultural similarity and cultural self-identification can be generalized to the point of having no meaning. As pointed out, the importance of cultural distinctions among racial-ethnic groups is frequently overlooked and is often granted little validity in actual practice. This has implications for hiring practices, supervision, skills required, and what tasks are actually expected to be performed in day-to-day work.

The issue of a counsellor's bi-culturalism and adaptation to North America was referred to by several participants in relation to their self-identity. The following comment is from a counsellor who is a fairly recent immigrant (7 years) in Canada.

She survived the Vietnamese war, the camp experience, and immigration and resettlement in Canada. The comments refer to her client's view of her.

> *I would say about myself I am a Vietnamese. Yes, but we have a little bit of a difference between South Vietnam and North Vietnam. I am from the north but I understand a little bit about the differences between us. In terms of awareness I can cope with both. People always say, I mean the Vietnamese, that I am too much Canadian. In the way of changes, that I see everything a little bit open than what they see. They say I am too much Canadian.*

She goes on to say how she understands why they (Vietnamese) say this. At times her "Canadianism" causes difficulties in her own family. Younger counsellors who have had part of their upbringing and education in Canada describe themselves as being bi-cultural.

> *I was born in Chile, in South America. My culture is very important to me and I am still very much in it. I feel that I am in two different cultures. One being here and one in Latin America which is the one my family is very much in. I feel that I go back and forth and integrate the two.*

> *I would describe myself as an Indo-Canadian, but in terms of working as a counsellor, I've grown up in Canada and I've been trained in the Western philosophy of therapy. So, I think I adhere to that, so I would say that, generally, I work within the Western framework of counselling. I would consider myself bi-cultural.*

These comments speak to the changeability of cultural identity and the effect that the environment has. For example, one could be quite bi-cultural at work but mono-cultural in the home or with extended family. As Woll (1996) points out, there is a tendency for people who live in bi-cultural environments where values and practices are contradictory, to maintain separate and distinct selves compatible with different

cultures. One could see the challenges to these counsellor's self-identity and situations where dilemmas were inevitable. As social workers, they needed to make themselves 'at home' in the work environment and show themselves to be professionals in the way that is defined by mainstream culture. But, they must also be accountable to the epistemological and political criteria of the cultures they are serving, as well as to themselves. One's self-identity is a strong determinant in how we practice.

Each of us, as counsellors, work from fundamental assumptions about the nature of cultural difference. These philosophical assumptions underlying multicultural counselling have been described by Carter and Qureshi (1995) who state that, *"assumptions and conceptions about culture are important because they circumscribe the types of knowledge, information, methods and skills provided within the context of a particular model"*. Three of these typologies are reflected in the counsellor interviews and provide useful insight into issues of cultural sensitivity and cultural self-identification.

Universal Approach

The universal approach to culture holds that all people are basically the same as human beings. In this approach, human characteristics are considered to be more important than specific cultural traits. The universal approach does not deny the existence of culture as such, but it places an intense focus on shared human

Race Based Approach

The race-based approach holds that race is the prime determinant of culture and that cultural groups are identified on the basis of racial characteristics. This position does not see race as a social construct, but as an inborn characteristic. Race classifies people by skin colour and physical features and a connection is made between culture and race. Counsellors made reference to this approach in the context of racial stereotyping of their clients, such as *"wondering whether the suspicion of child abuse might have been based on her being racially different"*. I have heard this position expressed by First Nations people who say that for them, culture is closely related to race, they are not prepared to accept the injustices of the past, and are not willing to acculturate to the dominant society. This philosophical position seemed necessary for them to reclaim their cultural identity. Here, socio-political aspects of race are connected to culture.

Client's Perceptions of Counsellors

Comments of client's perceptions of counsellor's culture were not always in accord with those of the counsellor. Clients, at times, appeared to place more importance on perceived similarities of culture than on actual similarity. A vivid example was given by an Indo-Canadian counsellor who after a great deal of outreach, connected with a Vietnamese family. The worker knew she was accepted and trusted when the parents regularly commented *"you know how things are because we have the same culture"*, even though they were clearly different.

Another counsellor stated,

> *Even though we spoke a different language, (the clients) assumed the culture was the same as far as families and children were concerned.*

Both workers attributed this to a level of trust that developed between them. Sue and Sue (1990) discuss the importance of trustworthiness in cross-cultural counselling. In Western society, certain roles like ministers, doctors, and counsellors exist to help people. To minorities, counsellors are often seen as agents of White authority and trust does not come with the role. For many minority populations, openness and acceptance is very much dependent on the attribution of perceived trustworthiness (Sue & Sue, 1990, p.85). Fukuyama (1990) explains that many people of divergent cultural groups share the experience of "being different" from the dominant cultural group. She notes that members of groups who do not benefit within the dominant culture's power structures experience various forms of discrimination, prejudice or neglect. Counsellor and client may identify the common experience of being marginalized. Atkinson and Lowe (1995) describe this as a perception of shared oppression, which might make it easier for clients of minority groups to establish trust with counsellors of a different, yet visible minority group.

In this study, the notion of being similar because of being different, was primarily described in terms of client's verbalizations to counsellors. It was, however, also a deliberate strategy used by some counsellors in making a connection or establishing a relationship with clients. One counsellor in describing her work with a

man from a different culture approached it by pointing out the commonalities in the governments and the similar division of labour based on gender in their country of origin. She reports his positive response as follows:

> *He wanted to talk to me because he says that from myself he knows that I can understand his situation. That I can understand his feeling and that I am very open to listening to him. So he accepts me as his counsellor.*

Counsellor's self-identity, and client's experience of their cultural knowledge provided the foundation from which counselling proceeded.

Working Across Cultural Difference - Common Practice Issues

Balancing Old and New Cultures

Counsellors working with clients of different cultures, as well as counsellors working with immigrant or refugee clients from their own cultures, described how they functioned as intermediaries between cultures. The methods that counsellors used to fulfill this role was to provide parenting programs, develop ESL (English as a second language) classes, and providing information about Canadian laws governing family relationships. They also saw themselves in a prominent position in providing alternate perspectives on issues such as discipline, domestic abuse, emotional expressiveness and assertiveness. All of these counsellors took this role very seriously. They saw that they were in a position to help their clients in a time of extreme stress. The following case examples from the interviews illustrate this point.

> *This case was similar to me in terms of ethnicity and culture. The 18 year old girl, (X), was not obeying her traditional parent's attitudes toward dating and going out at night. She threatened to move out of the house. Her parents told her that she was not only spoiling her chances of a good marriage, but also those of her sister. Her father threatened to beat her.*

The counsellor goes on to describe her interventions that resulted in a very positive outcome. Part of the counsellor's work was to act as an intermediary between the conflicts of two cultural worlds.

> *I told them that they were dealing with two different systems. In India, it's different. You are the ones making the decisions. You are responsible for that, but here right from elementary school these children are encouraged to make their own decisions and face the consequences. These parents were shocked because all was fine, then all of a sudden, (X), changed.*

The counsellor realized that this family was not going to be able to see the 'alternate view' unless they trusted and respected her and she would not dismiss their deeply held values.

A Vietnamese worker described how through self-disclosure she was able to engage the parents who had been referred by the Ministry for Children and Families for excessive disciplinary measures.

> *They tell me because they know that I understand why they do it. They have been raised by that rule all their lives. First they feel that I am not different from them. I told them that when I first came to Vancouver, my daughter's teacher asked me what to do because my daughter would not sit on the carpet at Kindergarten. I told the teacher that I would talk to her and hit her if she wouldn't do it. That was my answer. There is no shame. That is very very normal. So no, there is nothing to be ashamed about that, and I said that in front of people.*

> *Now I don't hit because I have learned from my work and my counselling course that it doesn't work. It only works a few times, then children get used to it. If you say do your homework or you will be punished, kids learn to say okay, punish me. I have to teach them (clients) Canadian ways to deal with discipline or their children will be taken away.*

Counsellors were aware of the potential for conflict created within families as individuals within the families were differently impacted by the expectations of the dominant culture.

> *The men find that they cannot perform their traditional role. A lot of them are frustrated, this is a new thing for them. To the women we say 'You have a voice'. Both have to understand a new culture, to learn to survive in this country.*

Issues of family violence were particularly challenging for those who worked with many non-Western cultures. A Latin American counsellor working in a domestic violence program states:

> *The message that I get repeatedly is that violence is not alright in their life and it's not okay in their culture. Now it's not accepted in the culture but it is not something that they will come forward and talk about either. So by them not talking about it and them keeping it in their family doesn't mean that it's accepted, it means that the values placed on family and secrecy and privacy are very high and very important. They believe it is between husband and wife and should stay there.*

Many counsellors described the difficulties in working with families where secrecy and privacy were of more importance than going to somebody outside of their own culture for help.

> *I would like to tell them to leave because I think it is really hurtful to their children, but I don't think it is my position to do that. So what I will try to do is educate them around the effects of violence, what happens down the road... I would say that 90% of the women in our program make the decision to leave their husbands. That is a hard decision for an ethnic woman, any woman, but particularly an ethnic woman. When an ethnic woman does this she can be cast out by the family and told, you are not part of the family anymore, we don't want to see you, you have betrayed us. So it is harder for some women to make that decision.*

Perhaps the same results occur as for Western women in violent situations, but the time frame, educational component, and building of support networks take longer to establish with women from non-Western communities.

Landau (1990) makes the point that the period of time through which change occurs is a crucial factor affecting how people can take new information and adjust. Many families are facing the stress of rapid attitudinal changes. When the pressure to adapt is too rapid, people can become more entrenched in the old patterns that they know well.

All of the counsellors spoke of the need for great sensitivity when imparting new information to families when this information conflicted with traditional norms.

> *I have to be careful of the way I talk and the way I provide ideas...The family would be angry with me. They would say you directed my daughter to be independent of me. I have to be aware of that.*

Counsellors sometimes viewed themselves as direct conduits of this new knowledge, or as modelling a different way of being. One male counsellor comments;

> *I was different from her (abusive) husband. That is why she wanted me to work with her son, so he could see the difference. She wanted her son to know that there were other ways...*

This same counsellor was aware of the limitations and drawbacks of being perceived as a representative of the dominant culture. He expressed discomfort as being perceived *"with all the answers"*, and as being the *"authority on men"*.

Another counsellor, in describing her immigrant forbearers, spoke of the sense of loss that was entailed in acculturation, a giving up of an important dimension of the self.

> *They felt they had to acculturate into the society, they didn't want to be seen as different, because there was a lot of discrimination. They had to give-up some of their things (customs).*

She recognized the losses that families experience as they adapt to a new society.

One counsellor described how she attempted to enter the client's culture, through generalizing from some of her own experiences:

> *I understood about karma and have an appreciation of her world view. I tried to get into her world-view and deal with her struggle from that standpoint. I could draw parallels between her experience and mine.*

Bridging cultural gaps, therefore, was reported as an important function, particularly with refugee and immigrant clients. Counsellors used a variety of methods to make the linkages, including using their own experiences as models, searching out and providing information to clients, and involving clients in various educational programs. This task frequently required a great deal of sensitivity, and providing useful information that would be accepted by clients. Generally, counsellors described this function as consuming a large amount of their physical and emotional resources.

> *They (Chinese) really need someone that they can trust. It takes a long, long time...I do encounter a lot of frustration in dealing with this (trust) specific issue.*

The taxing nature of cross-cultural work, particularly in contrast with the relatively easier work with mainstream clients, was frequently emphasized, with the implication, perhaps, that the demands of such work were not widely recognized or appreciated.

Providing Services and Resources

Providing services or resources, or brokering, on behalf of the client, was another function that was highlighted from the non-dominant culture. One of the reasons for securing and providing concrete services was to demonstrate to the clients that assistance was readily available and is provided by caring professionals. In this way, trust is established and a relationship can develop.

> *To build the relationship, anytime we had clothes to hand out, I would call her.*
>
> *I went with her to the doctor on my holiday so that she would know that I cared about her.*

Counsellors further indicated that this was frequently necessary because of the lack of knowledge and/or language made it impossible for the clients to undertake such tasks for themselves.

> *Because they were new to the country they did not know about a lot of resources. I helped her tap into different resources in the community like Christmas hampers, Safeway coupons, daycare, English classes. The family didn't have the ability to deal with the system.*

> *I feel that I have to be on standby all the time whenever they have a difficult time in their lives.*
>
> *I dealt with all kinds of different agencies and organizations. It was very time consuming. Sometimes the issue seemed trivial.*

The consequences for the counsellors themselves were that they felt that they *"worked harder", "felt tired"*, and were a *"lot more exhausted"* when they worked with these clients. Not only was the work more physically demanding in the sense of accompanying the client places, providing transportation to and from appointments, etc., but also it left the counsellors feeling highly responsible for the client's well-being.

> *No matter how hard I tried to define my boundaries, I felt like I was responsible for their stability. It was so heavy at times.*

Leong and Chou (1994) observed that what counsellors are expected to do in cross-cultural helping encounters may be considerably more demanding and complicated than that expected in mono-cultural settings.

Clients that were familiar with the dominant culture, in contrast, were perceived by the counsellors to be more able and self-reliant in dealing with the system, and unlikely to require a great deal of assistance.

> *White Canadians have more confidence that they can get what they need, they have more power in the system, they are more aware of their rights and more confident that they can negotiate the system...They are less worried about what action I might take.*
>
> *She knows the system well enough. She is aware of her legal rights. She is capable of going and doing what she needs to do.*

Advocating For Clients

The eight counsellors interviewed for this research, whether mainstream or not, whether working with similarity or difference, saw client advocacy as an important part of their role as helper. A common kind of advocacy reported was when counsellor and client shared a common culture, and the counsellor was in a position to communicate this shared understanding to others. Frequently, the recipient of this communication was a professional of the dominant culture. As these counsellors worked in schools, they often had to advocate for the family in a system that was supposed to be working for the benefit of the child. They saw the school system as just mirroring other systems in society. One counsellor described how the efforts of a dominant culture worker were exacerbating the problem rather than resolving it.

> *It was clear to me that the exclusion of the parents by the social worker in helping the girl only intensifies the conflict. The important issue was that the parents had never faced opposition to their traditional values.*

Dominant culture workers frequently had expectations of immigrant clients that were unrealistic. These expectations are outlined in government protocol (e.g. to get settlement benefits you have to go to English classes).

> *I had to explain to the Ministry worker (who considered the client resistant) that the client didn't have the extra energy to go to English classes and study because too many other (traumatic) things had happened to her.*

Advocacy was also undertaken by dominant culture workers, one of whom noted that it was much easier when all the participants, clients and staff, were of the same culture.

> *It was very easy for me to communicate on behalf of the family to the school administration. This was not something that needed to be translated in terms of cultural difference.*

This same worker spoke of feeling she was always needing to 'reframe' situations, so the dominant person would understand the clients and see them more positively.

> *...things were working out fine; she was going to school, getting better, and Mom was very happy about it. So, she brought this large basket of fruit to the teacher. The teacher was very angry and came to me and said, 'who does this mother think she is, does she think she can bribe me?'.*

Advocacy at times took on a political flavour when the injustice was seen not only as an individual issue, but generalized to the treatment of an identifiable group.

> *I was always dealing with other people's stereotypes...And other people's responses to this family...How difference is perceived in the school environment is one thing that I come up against, time after time, and have to work with.*
>
> *We had to find some strengths that this family had because otherwise the system was going to sink them.*

One worker expressed having to support a parent's rights in the face of what she considered to be racism on the part of the school personnel.

> *Parents are supposed to be invited to school based team meetings that are discussing their child. I felt (her racial difference) may have been why she was excluded from this proceeding. I felt good that I stuck up for the mother. I told her it was her right to be at a meeting discussing your child. The principal was furious with me that I told the mother it was her right.*

Advocacy for clients, like providing concrete services, caused some counsellors to reflect on the amount of intervention that was desirable, that was going to help them in the long run.

> *I'm always monitoring how much is advocacy, how much is rescuing, and how much is enabling her to stay where she is because I am doing the work for her.*

These counsellors, working in the schools in the inner city of Vancouver, saw themselves as necessary advocates for their clients. Cultural difference played an important part. Counsellors felt compelled to act on behalf of those who were unfamiliar with the system, less proficient in the language, or new to the country. Counsellors were conflicted about doing too much for the client, thereby not helping them in the long run, and increasing their dependency.

Understanding the Counselling Process

Having clients understand and engage in the non-crisis oriented counselling process was referred to by most of the interviewees. They saw this as being necessary in order for their clients to take advantage of resources available to them. At the same time, they saw that the culture of counselling derived from the dominant

culture, was foreign to some cultures, and at times contrary to the client's cultural values.

Counsellors working with clients of minority cultures reported how client's lack of familiarity with counselling sometimes required an indirect and more gradual invitation to engage in the helping process.

> *Coming to the school to talk about your lives, your family, your job...that is something that never happens in my culture. Never! That is too personal. So if I begin by offering counselling, they will go away.*

Understanding this cultural difference, the participants used creative ways to engage their clients. This included a lot of outreach such as talking to parents in the hallways and playground, telephoning with some information, and providing opportunities for socialization. This process was described as *"having to go more slowly, more informally"* but necessary to build connections.

One counsellor attributed her client's reluctance to accept help to a basic skepticism and mistrust born out of their traumatic life experiences.

> *Because of their background, they don't know if they can trust people. They don't know why people are helping them. They don't know how much they can count on me...and until they find out, they will not let me know their problems.*

Another counsellor, in attempting to inform her client about counselling, was acutely aware, because of her own cultural background, of the dissonance between the culture of counselling and the client's culture.

> *I explained about family counselling...She seemed to understand, but was sceptical. I understood that too. It was more of a Western way of dealing with a problem.*

This same counsellor went on to explain that her approach varies depending on the culture of the client.

> *I can see the difference between the Caucasian clients and the Asian clients because I deal with them a bit different...because of my interpretation of them, knowing social work or counselling, what that means to them. So my response to them is different than my response to an Asian client walking into my office to start with.*

The notion of educating clients about counselling, including the expression of feelings and the value of help-seeking, was evident as one counsellor related the progress made by a particular client.

> *He learned that even if family is private business he can disclose to others, to professionals, if he wants to get help.*

One counsellor spoke of how she had broadened her view of counselling and summed up her perspective by saying:

> *So for me it is to be creative and draw upon different ways of counselling, trying to fit things with people, see what works for them and not being stuck in a way that doesn't work. That is really important to me.*

In summary, counsellors reported that with minority clients it was frequently necessary to provide information about counselling, and introduce the idea gradually. Overcoming the barriers to the idea of counselling had to happen first before there could be any examination of family or individual dynamics.

Clients from the dominant culture were typically more familiar with counselling and were therefore more able to move into a counselling relationship. The counsellor's statements about working with mainstream clients effect this:

> *Mother had a very good idea of what counselling was and had been involved with counselling earlier.*
>
> *You expect the client from a Western culture to understand what a professional relationship is...I don't feel any great need to explain that relationship. I assume they know.*

All of the participants expressed a need to understand this point and to draw on creative ways to engage clients so that a helping relationship could develop.

The Language Barrier

The issue of language is a central concern and one that was frequently mentioned by the participants. Language is a large part of how we express ourselves, how we conceptualize the world, and how we build relationships. In the final analysis, it has to determine what clients you see and what clients you do not see.

In discussing her caseload, one worker reflects on what it is that brings the clients to her.

> *One is language. They come to me because of the language. Ninety percent of my clientele know that I can speak Cantonese so they come to me because they feel more comfortable that they can relate in terms of language.*

Another participant, in discussing her client's need to see someone who speaks the language, identified with her from her own life experience.

> *I do not speak English perfectly and I still have a very strong accent. I still wonder if white mainstream people would accept counselling from me, who has such a strong accent. So I know how the clients feel.*

The process of mutual struggle with language was at times described as a joint effort that counsellor and client shared.

> *I could see her going through the same struggle where she wasn't sure if she was clear with me or if I understood...I just kept trying, checking out with her that she understood, being honest with her if I didn't understand...we just struggled through it together.*

Counsellors who were not able to communicate in the client's native tongue saw it as a problem, but not one that seriously impaired the counselling process.

> *I monitor my speech and use simpler terms. I'm more expressive with my body.*

> *My work goes through a translator...and sometimes I only get a summary of the conversation. But I would watch the body language, and I would have time to think of appropriate questions or responses during the translation process.*

In contrast, counsellors who spoke with their clients in their native tongue, sometimes because the clients had no English facility, perceived the language barrier to present a considerable impediment.

> *Language was a big issue for this family, neither parent spoke English. They really only felt comfortable speaking in their own language about their emotions and what was going on for them.*

> *I think what made her comfortable was that I spoke her language...even though we are of different cultures, it was easier to work with her because of the common language...she had been working with (another English speaking professional) for two years...but wouldn't even say hello to her.*

These counsellors also expressed a different point of view regarding the effectiveness of English-speaking counsellors relying solely on non-verbal communication.

> *The worker, who didn't speak the (client's) language could only communicate through facial expressions...since the worker and the client only had limited expression they did not communicate well at all.*

The ability to speak a common language with clients was frequently perceived to be a way of initiating contact and connecting with the family.

> *The language barrier was a big issue because they didn't have the ability to communicate with the outside system...I saw this as an opportunity to get into the family.*
>
> *I provided the bridge for this family to communicate with the outside world and they relied on me for that connection.*

Being able to communicate with clients in their native language, in summary, was perceived to be a way of entry into the family, a way of demonstrating a connection with the family, a vehicle for providing service to the family, and a necessity in addressing underlying problems. When this was lacking, counsellors were required to use their creativity to overcome the barrier. The assumption that clients and counsellors should be matched in terms of language or culture was one that the counsellors frequently encountered.

Cultural Matching of Counsellor and Client

Research has generally provided support for the notion of matching clients and counsellors on the basis of ethnicity and language (Atkinson, 1983). However, this

There are certainly cultural similarities...similar class background, for example. I feel pretty comfortable...it's pretty relaxed.

Over identification was mentioned by two counsellors who felt that working with clients of similar cultural backgrounds may make them less effective with the client.

We are similar and because it's easy for me to think I know what she is saying I become less objective in some ways. She's explaining something and I kind of know what she means...it confounds my ability to do my job...I can't really know if I'm asking any probing questions.

I can understand why she is so angry and in pain but maybe I understand too much about her culture. I see she is stuck and I feel stuck with her. By knowing the culture I can see why she struggles...If you don't take a different point of view there is no way for you to work the problem out. If I was not so understanding of her culture I would probably challenge her more.

Several counsellors mentioned that from time to time they encounter clients who preferred not to work with them because of similarity of culture.

She was referred to me because we were from the same country...but she preferred to disassociate herself from that part of who she is...she was more concerned with the here and now...she was more focused on her assimilation into the larger culture.

She didn't want to continue (with a counsellor of her own culture). It brought up more shame...it was more painful, more overwhelming with someone of the same culture.

Participants in this study also spoke of difficulties that occurred when the lack of a shared culture was missing.

I'm more apt to second guess myself later when I've made a joke with a client of a different culture. I worry that I may have crossed some line. I'm not sure it was okay.

I felt a bit frustrated that I didn't know how to proceed...I didn't want to intrude with anything that's not appropriate.

I was so unsure of what to do because she still had hope of curing her daughter (through spirituality). What right did I have to tell her that it might not work.

In summary, it appeared that cultural matching provided benefits in many but not all cases. Client's preference for counsellors was a strong indicator of whether a particular counsellor was suitable or not. These participants also spoke of the benefits of providing alternate models, perspectives, or world views.

This data has provided me with an opportunity to begin to analyse some of the issues of similarity and difference in components of the counselling process and how this affects service outcome. A further review of these issues will continue in the discussion section of this paper.

CHAPTER V :

Conclusions and Implications

Expectations Versus Reality

When I began this research, I believed that by the end of this report I would be able to have a list of points that counsellors could take away with them in order to become more effective and sensitive cross-cultural social workers. The primary realization for myself after looking at the eight interviews I conducted, was that there

did not seem to be a prescribed way to practice cross-cultural social work. In the beginning, I thought that the participants would provide expert knowledge about their country of origin, and that this information would direct counsellors in working with that particular group. When discussing the social worker's self-identity, the issue of country of origin was discussed in terms of how they practice social work. However, each worker's experience was subjective and there were very few common points regarding the 'how to's' in cross-cultural practice. From my investigation I now believe that the skills necessary to be an effective social worker practising cross-culturally are built on basic social work skills. In addition, the ability to develop cultural self-awareness, examine beliefs, world views, and an increased understanding of difference are key components to effective practice.

Another expectation I had when I entered this research was that some terms would be more clearly defined for me. In particular, the common term 'culturally sensitive'. To my surprise, I was not able to attain a clear definition of what it means to practice in a culturally sensitive fashion. I believed this term was in a sense a magic potion and I was going to find the formula through discussions with my participants. The reality is that I was brought back to my beginning dilemma of what is sensitivity in cross-cultural practice, and how is it different than being sensitive in any other work? In trying to define cultural sensitivity it is clear that it is a difficult concept to describe, research, and measure, and perhaps cannot and should not be defined by one body of knowledge.

acculturation there was a sense of loss or giving up part of their old cultural self. In light of these cultural losses, I wonder if Canada truly is a multicultural society or if there is a pressure to remain homogeneous?

Generalizations

In our social service structure and in the wider society, there is a tendency to generalize and hold stereotypical beliefs about a particular cultural group. For social work practice, it is as important to recognize the differences between members of a group as its similarities. Focusing on this topic from the perspective of the counsellor's subjectivity, forced me to consider both the personal specific identity of the individual as well as the general knowledge about a cultural group. For both myself and the counsellors, this highlighted the ways general facts about a cultural group apply or do not apply to oneself, and fosters caution about what general characteristics of culture must be qualified by reference to differences. Most importantly, avoiding cultural stereotypes and generalizations enables us to view clients as unique and special within the general confines of their culture. All participants spoke of the limitations of taking a static approach to culture and defining a cultural group only in terms of general ideas, attitudes, and behaviours.

We are never going to completely get away from generalizations, nor should we. They can provide social workers with a tentative road map on how to interact with a particular client population. I believe the important point is not to rely too heavily on cultural generalizations. Clients should be allowed to define themselves

culturally so that they are thereby empowered as subjects. If a worker culturally defines the client, then they are assuming a position of power and the client one of subordination.

Similarity and Difference

From this research I realized that these workers, who had a great deal of cross-cultural counselling experience, struggled with areas of difference like any other social worker. Although they struggled with this issue, I was aware that they had developed a high level of acceptance for ambiguity and had developed creative and imaginative ways to reach out and bridge the gap produced by difference. The previous chapter outlined these skills which include methods of relationship building, service brokering, connecting clients to larger systems, introducing new information, and support. I also learned from these counsellors that developing an increased comfort with difference is a necessary tool for all social workers, as it increases our ability to take appropriate non-power stances with clients.

I wonder if it was these counsellor's high level of self awareness that allowed them to balance issues of similarity and difference? The counsellors in this study seemed to be able to find areas of similarity with clients in order to connect with them. They recognized that if attention was only paid to similarities, this would reinforce the orientation that all people are (or should be) the same. In turn, it could lead to a denial of difference. On the other hand, focusing only on difference, without attention to commonality, would reinforce distancing and separation. All the participants spoke

of the struggles with similarity and difference, the difficulty of finding a balance, and the support they gained from consulting with their colleagues who were also grappling with the same issues.

Nature of The Work

The discussions with the participants led me to believe that there are many demands placed on cross-cultural counsellors. They needed to be knowledgeable about the difference between two cultures - those of the client, and those of Western society. This required that they incorporate a wide range of practice skills into their practice, as well as being cautious in generalizing, that they respect the existence of a number of world views. The participants expressed that sometimes these demands were not recognized by members of the dominant culture.

An important part of the work life for these counsellors was the setting in which they worked. They delivered social work services from a school setting which was both an advantage as well as a disadvantage. For the clients it provided a neutral environment where they could receive a number of services in a non-threatening environment. The closer the counsellors were to the client's environment, the easier it was for these counsellors to engage the client. The counsellors viewed this as a real help to the client. From the perspective of the counsellor's work life, there were disadvantages. They were the only social service personnel in the school, and struggled to continually put forward a value position about people that was different from that of the educational system.

A predominating theme that emerged from discussion with the counsellors was the overwhelming responsibility they felt for their clients. Clients needed them to navigate the systems in order to receive services because of lack of language and knowledge about services available. The counsellors also recognized the poverty level of their clients and the essential need for services. Continually advocating for their client population was often emotionally exhausting. It was difficult to establish appropriate boundaries, and to make the decision about where their work ended and the client's work began.

I also learned from the participants in this research that flexibility is mandatory. Many of the workers I spoke with commented on how they needed to use different techniques, models, and strategies with clients who were not of the dominant culture or who had not yet 'fit' into the Western ways of confronting and working through personal issues. They had to be creative and flexible in finding new ways of communicating with these clients.

The matter of flexibility also arose when the participants were discussing how time consuming and exhausting it can be when working with people who have completely different world views than themselves. I recall one worker describing her frustration when trying to establish meeting times with one of her clients. The client felt that it was rude to be on time for an appointment, so she was usually half an hour late for their meetings. The worker explained that it was not rude to be on time however, if the client wanted to work that way it was okay. The worker then adjusted

her schedule half an hour ahead to suit this client's need as well as to respect her other client's time. It would have been very easy for this worker to tell her client that she must be there on time, end of discussion. Instead, she was able to be flexible, and create a more respectful relationship with her client.

Language capacity was an important area of concern. The difficulty of working with clients who did not have facility in English was recognized by both mono and multilingual workers. Multilingual workers placed more weight on the importance of speaking the client's language and saw this ability as a strong motivating factor for clients to seek their help. They questioned the ability of monolingual workers to adequately deal with the client's issues if a common language was not available. On the other hand, mono-lingual workers told of extraordinary measures taken to communicate directly with clients, or through interpreters. Whether it is 'essential' for a common language to exist between client and counsellor remains, for me, undecided.

There was also no definitive position taken by these workers on client/ counsellor matching based on culture. I believe that this relates to and strengthens the claim by multicultural workers that client's connection is based on more than just culture and includes other areas of difference such as gender, class, economic status, as well as trust and choice.

Implications For Practice & Policy

This study has implications for how social work practitioners and agency policy can support increased and improved multicultural practice.

1. For many years social agencies, like the wider Canadian society, have marginalized cultural and ethnic minority issues. An attitude of inclusivity and a willingness to consider an increased range of practice approaches is enriching to all practitioners and the field in general. I suggest that issues of cultural diversity receive more attention within the social service delivery system. This really speaks to how social service agencies organize themselves, the modalities they practice from, and the staff they hire. Since social work is in the business of change, and we ask that of our clients, it is interesting to note that social agencies are slow to change. To be relevant, it is important that organizations develop- change incentives which foster and embrace diversity.

2. Learning about diversity from working cross-culturally can lead to applications for practice with other disempowered populations. This study challenges us as practitioners to further document and detail the issues, conflicts, dilemmas, and practices of cross-cultural work. In terms of policy and practice, agencies need to increase their awareness of difference with marginalized populations to look specifically at the needs of these populations. We cannot clump all groups together under the heading of diversity. To illustrate this point, in the agency in which I

conducted my research, there is a committee called The Gay/ Lesbian/ Bisexual/ Transgendered Committee which focuses on practice issues for these populations. This committee has rejected management's proposal to join with the Multicultural Change Committee in order to re-constitute as a Diversity Committee. In my opinion, they correctly feel that diversity is too general and that each group has its own separate issues.

3. Conversations with these participants highlighted the collective wealth of knowledge that their cross-cultural work brings to an agency. I would suggest that agencies seek out and consult with experienced counsellors on how best to develop service practices, programs and policies which can meet the needs of minority populations.

My interest in doing this thesis came from working in a city where the population changed dramatically in ten years. I was also connected with a mainstream agency that primarily provided services to the dominant culture. This agency was forced to begin to work with immigrant populations. Social workers with different languages, training, and ethnicity were hired into this agency in order to effectively work with these new populations. The different perspectives that these workers brought to the agency has added to the agency's collective wealth of knowledge. These workers have been able to connect to the immigrant communities in ways that White workers could not. They have been able to get these communities

to tell the agency what their needs are. I believe this is essential if you are going to empower clients to direct the services which they need.

5. As agencies have gone through the Multicultural Organizational Change process, there has been a tendency to hire ethnically diverse people at entry level positions. My involvement with the staff of the agency would support the position commonly heard that minority workers are not promoted into positions of power. I struggle with the idea of affirmative action, and on what basis we make judgements for promotions. Although the "how" of this is unclear to me, I feel that it is important that diversity be represented at all levels of the organization including the Board of Directors and other decision making positions in the agency.

Implications For Further Research

1. More research is needed into the construct of "world view", which is frequently noted in the counselling profession. The concept of world view is discussed throughout the literature. This refers to the notion that people from different cultures view life differently. The most common theoretical model used to describe this idea is the one developed by Kluckholm and Stodbeck (1961). As noted in this paper, there is reason to challenge their description of a North American world view. The philosophy expressed no longer seems applicable to a truly heterogeneous society. I feel it is important that a more updated, inclusive world view be developed.

2. The multi-faceted nature of culture needs to be highlighted within research studies. Research which focuses on the general construct of difference would add to the social work knowledge base. Culture is an unclear concept. In this study, that confusion was highlighted as counsellors struggled to relate their cultural self image to that of their clients.

Despite the large amount of research, which has been conducted in the last five years on cross-cultural practice skills, I feel we need to explore the dynamic nature of culture and how this influences the way in which social workers practice. Research in this area could add to the general social work knowledge base particularly if the cultural research was connected to more general studies of similarity and difference.

3. I feel further studies on subjectivities of people standing on the margin of two (or more) cultures would be important in order to support or contradict the findings from this study. As discussed throughout this paper, I believe culture is continually changing. If this is the case, and an individual's subjective experiences are imbedded within their culture, then is it not safe to assume that people's subjectivites are always changing and growing? Interestingly, the counsellors in this study seemed to confront their own culture of origin, but not their same culture in the monolithic sense. There appeared to be a separation between the counsellor's culture "then", and their Canadian culture "now". I felt there was an acknowledgement of where they came

from and how their experiences had shaped their lives, however, I also had the feeling that many of the workers had left their culture behind and saw themselves as 'different' from clients who shared their same culture of origin.

4. I believe non-Western helping modalities such as spirituality, meditation, and non-verbal communication should be researched with the purpose of incorporating these practices into social work knowledge. I question why other forms of helping were not discussed in the interviews I conducted, with the exception of non-verbal strategies for communicating. Every counsellor drew on Westernized practice modalities with no reference to other healing techniques experienced in their own country of origin. When one 'becomes Canadian', or is Westernized, does that mean that the models used for helping can have no place or voice in this "Multicultural Canada"? Can we not move beyond the traditional modalities guiding social work practice, and incorporate 'different' strategies used in non-Western societies in order to be more reflective of the diverse culture in which we live?

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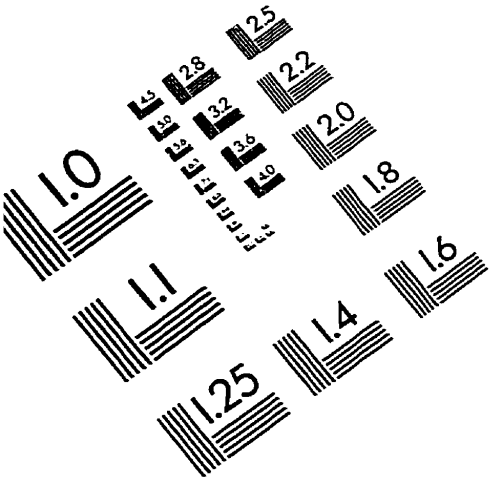

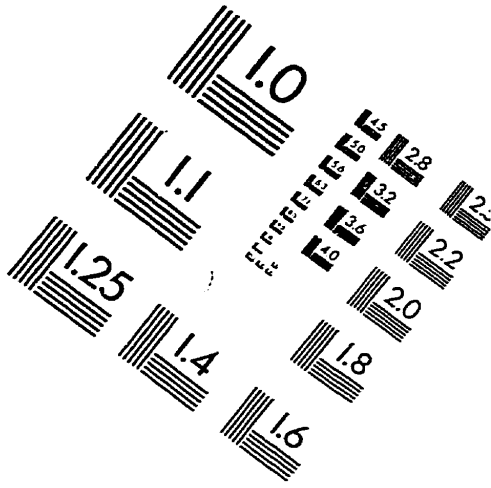

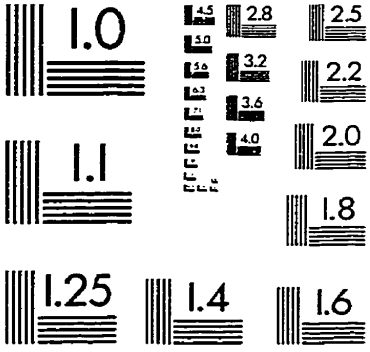

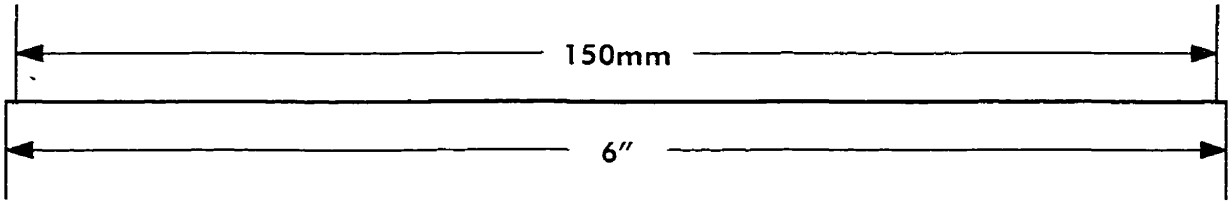

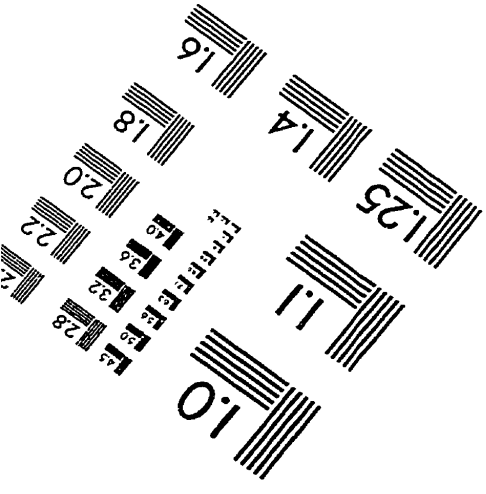

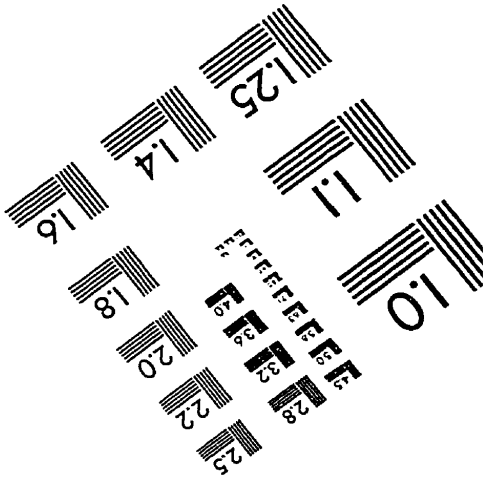

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