

Beyond Cultural Competence: Human Diversity and the Appropriateness of Asseverative Goals

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I argue that, as a profession, psychology needs to aspire beyond the goal of achieving cultural competence when addressing issues of human diversity. Although laudable, cultural competency as a goal may not set the bar high enough to achieve equity regarding those minority groups traditionally neglected or marginalized. As such, I further argue that asseverative objectives—ones that ask us to aver, affirm, and embrace human diversity—would be more consistent with a truly egalitarian perspective and our own code of ethics. I then describe barriers to achieving such goals that exist as endemic aspects of clinical psychology's worldview of human behavior and psychopathology, as well as inherent characteristics of simply being human. Last, I suggest that in order to reach such asseverative goals, we need to be more active (as compared to simply reading relevant journal articles) in our daily activities when it comes to issues of human diversity.

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The article by Eubanks-Carter, Burkell, and Goldfried (this issue) cogently provides us with information that potentially fosters our ability to practice in a manner more consistent with guidelines recently put forth by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2003) regarding lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) clients. For example, these APA guidelines underscore the importance for psychologists continuously to seek and acquire education and training regarding LGB issues. This is in keeping with APA's historic stance to combat discrimination and prejudice against minority groups that have traditionally been neglected socially, economically, and politically, and to promote sensitivity and awareness of human diversity across the spectrum of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability status, and religious and spiritual beliefs. It is with regard to this greater panoply of diverse individuals and groups, including the LGB population, that I wish to direct my commentary.

America is a society full of contradictions, paradoxes, and ironies. We generally do not think of ourselves in that manner, but we are. In the present context, I will focus on the paradox of choice. For most of us, we respond positively to all the variety and divergences that exist in our lives, especially when it comes to consumer goods and activities. Think about how many different types of breakfast cereals or bottled waters there are to choose from as we walk down the grocery aisle. Think about, when we pick up the remote control device, the sheer plethora of channels that challenge our decision-making abilities on any given evening. No longer the neighborhood movie theatre, we now have "multiplexes" where often ten different movies are showing at the same time. We are a nation that avers this diversity of options and choices.

Now think about *not* having such variety. Only one breakfast cereal to consume, only one TV channel to watch, and only one book to read. Herein lies the paradox—if we are so enamored with variety in these spheres of our lives, why do we not embrace, affirm, or asseverate diversity among our citizens? This is the question that I was wrestling with on my way back from Washington, DC, a few weeks ago with my wife, Christine, after we had joined the hundreds of thousands of individuals who were protesting on behalf of “women’s lives” and the right to have choices regarding the disposition of their pregnancies. This was the question that I was wrestling with when I watched various television news reports about prisoner abuse in Iraq, the struggle for gay and lesbian individuals to obtain the right to have same-sex marriages legally recognized in America, and the desecration of churches, temples, and mosques with “hate language graffiti.” This was the question I was wrestling with when I became aware that this year (2004) is the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, but wonder how far we have really come. And this was the question that I was wrestling with when I was asked to write a commentary in response to the article written by Eubanks-Carter et al.

Such events as noted above, in combination with reading the Eubanks-Carter et al. paper, collectively led me to pose a set of fundamental questions regarding human diversity: Why do we not accept it, why do we not embrace it, why do we not celebrate it? Eubanks-Carter et al. provide us, as psychologists and mental health professionals, with sound information regarding how to enhance our clinical effectiveness with LGB clients. Such guidelines are certainly essential to our becoming more culturally sensitive and competent in our applied work with various diverse populations. But given the above paradox, I believe that, as psychologists, we need to go beyond the goal of attaining multicultural *competence*—we need to affirm and *avere* human diversity. We need to eradicate the discrepancy between what we may overtly espouse and the actual attention and focus we afford these issues in our day-to-day activities. As Eubanks-Carter et al. and others (e.g., Biaggio, Orchard, Larson, Petrino, & Mihara, 2003; Bohan & Russell, 1999) have reported, for example with regard to LGB individuals, neither overt nor subtle homophobia

has been eradicated from the halls of psychology. Surveys of LGB faculty indicate that support from their academic institutions remain lacking (McNaron, 1997; Myrick & Brown, 1998).

Further, with regard to ethnic diversity issues, Tinsley-Jones (2001), based on an analysis of in-depth responses from several psychologists of color, found that although some gains have been made, “negative appraisals very clearly predominated, and covert acts of racism were cited, providing additional evidence that racism is in psychology’s midst” (p. 573). Perhaps positing asseverative goals, which would be of a higher standard, as compared to articulating ones that simply espouse competency, might serve the field of psychology better if we wish to be more consistent with our stated professional ethics and become models of human tolerance and affirmation. Moreover, perhaps by aspiring to such goals we can become more effective with our own patients.

Having spent more than 25 years investigating the application of problem-solving principles when coping with personal and social difficulties (e.g., Nezu, 2004), the next question that came to mind when contemplating a shift in goals was as follows: What obstacles might stand in our way of achieving such asseverative objectives? Lack of information, especially due to the limited training we received in graduate school regarding multicultural issues (Eubanks-Carter et al., this issue; Jackson, 2004), certainly is a major barrier to becoming culturally competent. That is why such papers as the Eubanks-Carter et al. article need to be published in mainstream psychology journals. (After all, how many psychologists subscribe to, or even peruse, specialty journals that focus on ethnic diversity or sexual orientation topics?) However, more subtle obstacles actually exist beyond lack of information that make the leap to averring cultural diversity particularly difficult.

SUBTLE OBSTACLES TO OVERCOME: PSYCHOLOGY, HEAL THYSELF

Three barriers that come to mind include (a) excessive focus on internal psychological processes, (b) the “medicalization” of human behavior, and (c) the ubiquity of unconscious biases against “out-group” members.

Excessive Focus on Intra-Individual Factors

Although a biopsychosocial model tends to be a pervasive conceptual framework used by psychologists to understand and explain both human behavior and psychopathology (Nezu, Nezu, & Geller, 2003), the third construct (i.e., social factors), especially as it pertains to the influence of culture, often is sorely overlooked. The vast majority of accepted models of normal and abnormal human behavior espoused by clinical psychologists tend to focus on intra-individual characteristics. As such, the uniformity myth suggesting that we all exist within the same dominant culture often is subtly reinforced, and the need to focus on cultural diversity issues becomes overlooked.

I have previously argued that our field needs to take more of a public health perspective, both in terms of better understanding socio-cultural influences on human behavior, as well as identifying means to increase the impact of our interventions (e.g., Nezu, Nezu, Trunzo, & Sprague, 1998). I now argue that by adopting this larger perspective (or simply affording equal weight to the “social-cultural” part of the biopsychosocial equation), we may be able to incorporate issues of diversity in our mainstream models such that they are no longer relegated to “second class conceptual citizenship” (see Nezu, Nezu, & Lombardo, 2004).

The “Medicalization” of Human Problems

Related to the above, a second obstacle includes the pervasiveness of a worldview that emphasizes a medical model of human behavior and psychopathology. Albee (2000) has railed against the profession of clinical psychology regarding its uncritical embracing of a medical model, suggesting that politically a medical model

is supported by the ruling class because it does not require social change and major readjustments to the status quo. The social model, on the other hand, seeks to end or to reduce poverty with all its associated stresses, as well as discrimination, exploitation, and prejudices as other major sources of stress leading to emotional problems. By aligning itself with the conservative view of causation, clinical psychology has joined the forces that perpetuate social injustice. (p. 248)

To Albee’s (2000) argument I would add the concern that by *overemphasizing* a medical conceptualization of human behavior and problems, psychology has *underemphasized* the focus on socio-cultural variables. Although the interdisciplinary subfield of cultural psychology is gaining momentum (e.g., Pederson, Carter, & Ponterotto, 1996), as Cole (1996) suggested not too long ago, “it is difficult for many academic psychologists to assign culture more than a secondary, often superficial role in the constitution of our mental life” (p. 1).

Psychologists as Humans: The Inevitability of Subtle Bias

As Eubanks-Carter et al. correctly point out, our behavior towards LGB clients may be influenced by the presence of subtle biases. However, based on a century’s worth of social psychological research (e.g., Fiske, 1998), it would appear that such bias may be more pervasive and misunderstood than we might initially think. This research base involves psychological investigations concerning prejudice and discrimination against members of an “out-group.” According to this research, subtle biases about others who are not in the “in-group” (our own group) are actually rampant. Fiske (2002), for example, suggests that studies have shown that, of Western democratic populations, only approximately 10% can be considered overtly and blatantly biased extremists (those individuals whom we would likely term prejudiced or bigoted). On the other hand, whereas 80% can be characterized as having egalitarian values, they also harbor biases about the out-group that are both automatic and unconscious.

As applied to racial issues, for example, Dovidio and Gaertner (1986) termed this phenomena as “aversive racism,” which suggests that, on one hand, white Americans, by virtue of their self-characterization as being fair and unprejudiced, sympathize with victims of injustice such as black Americans and other racial minorities, and even overtly support government policies that promote racial equality. However, on the other hand, this sympathetic stance does not include a *pro-black* sentiment, nor is it based on a desire to establish enhanced relationships. In this manner, such individuals are able to balance the influence of a historically racist culture in the United States that promulgates feelings of uneasiness, discomfort, and fear (but not necessarily hate) regarding other racial groups, while continuing to

view themselves as non-racists even though they actually engage in discriminatory behavior. For example, recent studies using brain imaging techniques indicate that when provided with images of black faces, self-defined unprejudiced whites respond in a more hostile way as compared to being presented with white faces (Fiske, 2002).

In addition, such biases take the form of “cool indifference or neglect” rather than open hostility. The out-group (e.g., ethnic minorities, LGB individuals) is rarely the target of derogation or punishment; however, they also rarely receive rewards or respect. Members of the in-group tend to blame the out-group for any negative outcomes (e.g., poverty, restricted civil rights), saying the latter “bring it upon themselves.” It is the attribute of being in a certain category different from ourselves (e.g., racial minority, gay man) that is the essential reason for any failings.

Although I know of no studies that have directly investigated whether psychologists harbor such subtle biases against members of the out-group (e.g., ethnic minority clients, LGB clients, older clients), I also know of no data that indicates that having been awarded an advanced degree in psychology makes us immune to having biases that a plethora of research suggests is ubiquitous and omnipresent among humans. More specifically, aversive racism is not presumed to be pathological or a product of deviant cognitive processes. Rather, it reflects normal cognitive human processing that results from the combination of cultural and historical influences on white Americans (Dion, 2003).

GOING FROM CULTURALLY COMPETENT TO CULTURALLY ASSEVERATIVE

If one accepts the appropriateness and desirability of having asseverative goals as part of the overarching manner in which we address human diversity, the next step is to identify effective means to attain such objectives. Because several excellent articles have been published during the last few years that are replete with thoughtful and insightful suggestions on achieving cultural competency, some of which may be relevant to the attainment of goals that embrace human diversity, I will not repeat them here other than to provide citations (Brawer, Handal, Fabricatore, Roberts, & Wajda-Johnston, 2002; Cardemil & Battle, 2003; Finkel,

Storaasli, Bandele, & Schaefer, 2003; Hansen, Pepitone-Arreola-Rockwell, & Greene, 2000; La Roche & Maxie, 2003; Molinari et al., 2003; Schneider, Brown, & Glassgold, 2002; Stuart, 2004; Yarhouse & VanOrman, 1999). However, I am reminded of an ancient Chinese proverb: “Tell me, I’ll forget; show me, I may remember; but involve me, and I’ll understand.” This suggests to me that simply reading books and journal articles regarding diversity issues is unlikely to engender massive change. We need to get involved. To that end, I would strongly encourage the reader to join organizations that promote, embrace, aver, and asseverate human diversity.

Social psychology research has suggested that intergroup bias, in fact, can be reduced through constructive contact if certain prerequisite features are present (Pettigrew, 1998). These include (a) equal status among groups within the setting, (b) shared goals, (c) cooperation among groups, (d) opportunities for friendship, and (e) support from the relevant authorities. It would seem that sponsorship or membership in relevant associations might meet most of these conditions.

However, beyond those psychological organizations that “traditionally” represent a particular minority group (e.g., Asian-American Psychological Association; Division 44 of APA—Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues), I also suggest that the reader considers supporting or joining related groups whose mission statements would be more in keeping with asseverative goals. One such organization is AFFIRM (<http://www.naples.cc.sunysb.edu>), the network of psychologists who openly support their lesbian, gay, and bisexual family members. Among several goals included in their mission statement are the following: to openly *support* (italics added) our LGB children, grandchildren, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, cousins, aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers, and grandparents; and to *advocate* (italics added) gay-affirmative research and clinical work on LGB issues.

Another organization, not aligned with any particular academic or professional discipline, is the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS). According to the self-description on their Web site (<http://www.nomas.org>), “NOMAS advocates a perspective that is pro-feminist, gay-affirmative, anti-racist, and committed to justice on a broad range of social issues

including class, age, religion, and physical abilities. We affirm that working to make this nation's ideals of equality for all people a reality is the finest expression of what it means to be men."

CLOSING REMARKS

Living in Philadelphia, I have the privilege of frequently passing by many historic national monuments, such as the Liberty Bell and Constitution Hall. However, in reflecting upon such national treasures, I am reminded that historic fact tells us that our founding fathers, in using the phrase "We, the people" at the beginning of our constitution, only meant to include white male landowners. Women, black slaves, and poor white men were not included in this cohort. In many ways, laudable changes have occurred during the past 200 and more years, but in many others we have a long way to go. It is my hypothesis, that by *setting* asseverative goals regarding how we address human diversity, we can actually *achieve* them, thus transforming the phrase, "we, the people," to be more inclusive than exclusive. Remember that Principle E of our own ethics code begins with the phrase, "psychologists respect the dignity and worth of *all* (italics added) people" (APA, 2002).

NOTE

In my attempt to go beyond "preaching to the choir," I wanted to attract individuals who might otherwise not read articles pertaining to the topic of multicultural diversity. Herein lies my rationale for using the phrase "the appositeness of asseverative goals" in the title: It is likely that one needs to actually read this commentary to learn the meaning of the title.

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