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Psychotherapy and Counseling with Minorities: A Cognitive Approach to Individual and Cultural Differences, by Manuel Ramirez III

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Published by W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 1993.

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Jay Haley

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Published by W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 1993.

All of the above are available for review

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Psychotherapy and Counseling with Minorities: A Cognitive Approach to Individual and Cultural Differences

Manuel Ramirez III. New York: Pergamon Press (Psychology Practitioner Guidebooks), 1991.

Clinical psychology and related professions have lately initiated a serious effort to come to terms with issues of human diversity, an effort marked by the recent appearance of a variety of books, special issues of journals, and conference symposia devoted to this topic. Ramirez' book is a helpful contribution to this expanding literature. The author encourages clinicians to examine constructively those cross-cultural issues that arise in mental health work, especially the differences in norms, expectations, perceptual and cognitive styles, and general life experiences encountered when therapist and client identify with different cultural or ethnic groups.

Sensitive discussion of ethnic and cultural differences requires attaining a balance between celebrating diversity, on the one hand, and promoting equality, on the other. Promoting equality by encouraging unity and homogeneity may be well-intentioned but can give the appearance of devaluing pluralism. Yet celebrating diversity and recognizing pluralism by producing a special literature about traditionally disenfranchised or under-represented groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and lesbians and gay men can be seen as reflecting and perpetuating marginalization

(Comas-Diaz and Stricker, 1993). Ideally, discussion of human diversity would be interwoven among all the other threads in the literature of our professions.

We discovered (with relief) that Ramirez takes a constructive approach and believes all of us to be capable of showing cultural flexibility ("flex"), whatever our individual cultural identifications may be. Cultural flex is important to therapists and clients alike in dealing with the negative effects of the "mismatch syndrome". This is one of the book's central concepts. Victims of cultural mismatch may feel alone, hopeless, and misunderstood when caught between the conflicting expectations of mainstream society and one's particular cultural sub-group. What makes this formulation so constructive is that everyone is a member of a sub-group; everyone inevitably encounters mismatch to some degree and in some form in interacting with the social world.

Other positive aspects of Ramirez' approach include the following. He recommends a cognitive therapeutic approach as especially engaging and effective with certain individuals belonging to minority groups. He suggests paper and pencil tasks to keep track of problems and their solutions, a school-like approach that may seem less threatening to those intimidated by traditional images of psychological therapy. He urges clients and therapists to do the same tasks, and encourages therapists to do their homework and read and learn as much as possible about different human groups. Finally, he guides us towards the selection of values that are adaptive for people who feel different.

In Ramirez' model, therapists determine for themselves the degree to which they can be cognitively flexible or able to change their typical styles in order to best meet the demands of the particular situation. The "Self Life History", completed by therapists, allows assessment of their own cross-cultural experiences and attitudes toward diversity.

The primary difficulty with the book is that it does not entirely escape the tendency to categorize minority groups or to approach their problems in a mechanistic manner. The ideas that human problems arise when people are unable to be flexible, and that it is helpful to adapt one's behavior or interpersonal style to meet the demands of social interaction in a complex and multi-cultural society, are at the same time helpful and simplistic. It seems idealistic, indeed, to suggest that all of the problems for which members of minority groups seek assistance may be readily resolved by this approach.

The author does not address possible limitations of his approach. There is the implication that everyone's problems stem from "feeling different" and that everything will be better once this intervention is implemented. Also, some of the solutions offered to clients involve approaching a role model from whom one can obtain advice. However, the assumption that an appropriate role model will always be available is questionable (we could argue that if more role models were available, fewer people would be troubled by feeling different!).

The book's ending seemed a trifle too idealistic. All of the case histories used as examples throughout the text ended in perfect resolution. This outcome reminded us more of the denouement of a half-hour television comedy than of the often

frustrating realities of clinical practice, in which premature termination, problem resurgence, and adverse environmental circumstances all too often complicate the smooth progress of therapy.

To return to our earlier point, there are inescapable difficulties in trying to minimize ethnic and cultural differences while stressing the benefits of societal diversity. The book is about providing helpful professional interventions to people from minority groups (title), and it is about using a cognitive approach in transcending difficulties that may arise from cultural differences (sub-title). We prefer the sub-title to the title, and find dimensions of difference a more helpful concept than categories of minority groups. Nonetheless, Ramirez has written a useful and stimulating book that will serve as an ideal starting-point for professional discussions.

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Reference

COMAS-DIAZ, L. and STRICKER, G. (1993). Special issue: Diversity in clinical psychology: theory, research, and practice. *The Clinical Psychologist* 46, 43-89.