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The Social Construction of 'Ethnic Identity': Confusion over Terms? How the Sociology of 'Ethnic Identity' can be Relevant to the Use of Theory in Counselling Psychology

Abstract

In today's shifting social climate of financial crises, war, economic migration and refugee crises, ethnic identity is an increasingly important psychosocial variable to consider within the helping professions. In this article, a postmodern perspective on the development and experience of ethnic identity is discussed - in particular, the social constructionist view, which is based on a fluid, non-binary identity logic. Using applications of ethnic identity in the field of counselling psychology as a professional example, some major theoretical approaches to the study of ethnic identity are briefly described - including social identity theory, acculturation and psychodynamic approaches, as well as the contribution of identity process theory - and questions are raised about the useful potential of adopting this postmodern perspective alongside these standard theoretical models in clinical work.

Keywords

acculturation, cultural identity, ethnic identity development, immigration, race

Introduction

In this selective review of literature about ethnic identity, I will promote the postmodern awareness of the counselling psychologist making formulations about clients for whom ethnic identity seems at issue, or who is trying to challenge their own ethnocentric or fixed ways of thinking about ethnic identity. In doing so, I will argue that the appropriate formulation of psychological hypotheses must involve a "radical epistemological shift" (Gill, 1996, p.144) on behalf of the counselling psychologist using the findings of mainstream psychological research. Specific therapeutic interventions, which have been adequately addressed elsewhere (e.g. d'Ardenne & Mahtani, 1989; Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner & Trimble, 1996), will not be further explored, though some attention will be given to the way theory may impinge on understanding clients.

As initial caveats to the thesis presented here, it is important to point out that this article will focus mostly on data and research from a British and American social context, and its applicability to other social contexts will therefore need to be assessed by further research. Also, further due consideration will need to be given to issues such as the interplay and dynamics of the ethnic backgrounds of clinicians and their clients within the majority society in which counselling takes place: I have not considered, for example, how dynamics will differ if the counsellor is from an ethnic minority background and the client from an ethic majority background, or vice versa. I have also not considered other issues which merit further research, such as how the situation of migrant populations whose status has gone from majority in-group to minority out-group as a result of their migration, differs from those who are born ethnically diverse within a majority society of different ethnicity – an issue of obvious importance to counselling refugees.

Terminology

A further introductory caveat may be made here concerning terminology, namely my use of the words 'race' and 'ethnicity' as being fairly interchangeable from a pragmatic, clinical perspective. 'Ethnicity', 'race', 'nationality' - and even 'culture', and sometimes 'religion' – can constitute major bases of the feeling and experience of difference or otherness within society. They are of course all separate (but nevertheless connected) sociological concepts, each with its own research and literature which needs to be taken into account when studied in detail; for the purposes of this paper however, I will assume that they can all refer in practice to a person's out-group status, impacting the emotional and the social experience of both the client and the counselling psychologist. In other words, the person may feel they are different because of any of these factors, and 'ethnic identity' is the term I use in this paper to indicate that sense of difference.

Etymologically, the word 'ethnic' derives from the Greek root "εθνος". Herodotus refers to εθνος as a group of people of common descent, common language, common religion, and common morals and customs. The Indo-European root *swedh-, from which the εθ- prefix originates, refers to custom or habit, hence 'ethnics' were persons of similar customs and habits. Interestingly, the adjective "εθνικος" meant "heathen" or gentile in the Old Testament, giving the word perhaps the initial negative connotation which it still seems to carry today. Ultimately εθνος in Greek came to mean a nation-state, a geographical area the boundaries of which are determined by the vicissitudes of political change.

Byrne (1997), in an article in *The Sunday Times*, reports on the response created by research produced by the Commission for Racial Equality showing that Irish people in Britain experience regular discrimination. There has been sharp criticism from Irish

people of this work, on the grounds that they do not wish to be "ghettoised" or perceived as "ethnic". Surely however, *everyone* is "ethnic", or is there some special meaning of this word which applies only to those who are not of Northern European origin? English & English (1958) recognise the pitfalls of such a term by defining *ethnic group* as "an intentionally vague or general term used to avoid the false objectivity of 'race': the ethnic group may be a nation, a people, a language group, a sociologically-defined so-called 'race', or a group bound together in a coherent cultural entity by a religion." (quoted in Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1989, p.25).

'Identity' is itself a complex term, deriving from the Latin "idem", meaning "same". Sampson (1989), following the deconstructionist philosopher Derrida, juxtaposes the logic of identity which assumes there is *either* a particular presence (in this case a specific identity) *or* its absence, with the logic of the supplement, which asserts that since a presence implies and is defined by its absence, it is more correct to say there is *both* a presence *and* its absence. The Western scientific mind, steeped in an epistemological tradition of identity logic since Plato, reels at this assertion; yet the notion of 'sameness' is still contained in the term 'identity' - Rycroft (1968) defines it as "the sense of one's continuous being as an entity distinguishable from all others" (p. 76), pointing perhaps to the reliance of the concept on notions of personal distinctiveness (sameness across space) and continuity (sameness across time), which are later discussed in Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986).

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that these vague terms when combined to give 'ethnic identity' offer different workers, who are approaching ethnic identity from different theoretical perspectives, the opportunity to provide multiple definitions and cover several different constructs including language, culture, nationality, religion, race[1], geographical region and others, such as behaviour, values, and knowledge of ethnic group history (Rogler, Cooney & Ortiz, 1980). In her comprehensive review of research

[1] 'Race' is an elusive and unclear concept that carries little biological meaning. Littlewood and Lipsedge (1989) point out that all humans are genetically related and we all therefore have greater or lesser degrees of relatedness with other people. There is no obvious point at which we could draw a line and say that this, but not that, group of people constitute a race: we can have five hundred 'races', or five, or one. There is no universally valid way of classifying people. The degree of conviction with which the (external, phenotypic rather than genotypic) differences are regarded as biologically significant, however, appears to depend on the climate of political opinion. Scientifically justified racism has given imperialism impetus since the dawn of psychology, especially in the late 19th century with the rise of such theoretical movements as Social Darwinism, exemplified in the philosophy of Herbert Spencer (who suggested to Darwin to use the phrase 'survival of the fittest' (Miller,1986)), with the eugenics movement founded by the psychologist Francis Galton, and in our more recent history the half-baked biological arguments of Nazism. Events such as WWII and the more recent 'ethnic cleansing' in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda show the power that the concepts of race and ethnicity still have; the tragic irony is that the biological truth is the opposite of what racists would like to believe: attempts to achieve racial 'purity' actually weaken humanity - it is genetic diversity and enrichment of the 'gene pool' that bestow advantages and create a stronger species.

on ethnic identity in adolescents and adults, Phinney (1990) states that "ethnic identity is central to the psychological functioning of members of ethnic and racial minority groups" (p. 499), thereby already indicating that ethnic identity is a multifactorial construct by including race as one of its important variables, and simultaneously drawing attention away from the effects of ethnic identity on majority ingroups. What seems to be acknowledged throughout, however, implicitly or explicitly, is the fluidity and dynamic nature of this concept (Rosenthal, Whittle & Bell, 1988; Liebkind, 1992). Given this uncertainty in use and bearing in mind Foucault (1981) who demonstrated the intimate relationship between knowledge and power, counselling psychologists, in working with difference, need to be aware of the political implications of the definitions and meanings they employ.

Main Approaches to the Study of Ethnic Identity

Phinney (1990) lists three main theoretical approaches to the study of ethnic identity: social identity theory, acculturation and psychodynamic approaches. To this may be added the contribution of identity process theory (Breakwell, 1986).

Social Identity Theory

There is a large literature approaching ethnic identity from this perspective. Its main developers were Tajfel and Turner (1979), who asserted that simply being a member of a group provides individuals with a sense of belonging that contributes to a positive self-concept. The mere act of *social categorisation* motivates individuals to compare themselves with others for the purposes of self-evaluation. Individuals desire positive self-evaluation (a notion discussed in Liebkind's (1992) perspective on ethnic identity presented below), identify with their ingroup, and evaluate themselves positively by negative comparison with a relevant outgroup.

The predictions made by social identity theorists have spawned much research into ethnic identity. One of the earliest statements of social identity theory was made by Lewin (1948), who emphasized that individuals need a firm sense of group identification to maintain a sense of well-being. Milner (1997), for example, in an article on racism and childhood identity, explains that majority group children *actively seek* a set of racial attitudes, partly because the superior / inferior group relations they portray satisfies the developing need for a positive social identity. It is only rational, then, that young ethnic minority children may deny their racial status in a misguided attempt for the same positive social identity. Such a notion led to the development of the much-criticised "self-hatred hypothesis" which underlay early research (Clark & Clark, 1947). This hypothesis maintains

that identification with one's own racial or ethnic group is normative, and any out-group orientation is interpretable in terms of psychopathology (Harris, 1995). The research used the 'doll-paradigm', asking a minority child - usually black American - to choose a black or white doll with such questions as "Which doll would you like to play with?". A major fault with this forced-choice measure is that it cannot be determined if the child is responding purely on the basis of the doll as a toy, or if the responses can be generalised to the racial group which the doll represents. Also, a false polarisation effect is obtained in that by accepting one doll, it is assumed that the child is rejecting the other. This was shown not to be the case when children were offered the choice of both dolls (Aboud, 1988).

Social identity theory would also predict that if the dominant group in a society holds the traits or characteristics of an ethnic group in low esteem, then ethnic group members are potentially faced with a negative social identity. This would explain the phenomenon of, for example, positively re-evaluating existing group characteristics, e.g. the Black Power movement in the 1970's positively re-evaluating blackness: "Black is Beautiful" (Lloyd et al, 1984). The effects of a consistent and strong minority on majority attitudes were shown by Moscovici and colleagues' (1969) studies on minority influence. It was argued that the key factor is the minority's *behavioural style* - by behaving in a manner that is consistent and moderate (rather than inconsistent and extreme), 'speaking truth to power' as the human rights phrase goes, a minority leads a majority to attribute to its members qualities such as conviction, autonomy and competence. This in turn causes the majority to question its position and can bring about social change.

Another phenomenon which could be explained by this theory is the use of the intergroup strategy known as "passing" (as members of the dominant group), which will be explained below, however, through identity process theory.

Bearing in mind that in human beings the need to belong is as primary as reproductive and nutritional needs (cf. Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the importance of ethnic identity should not be underestimated by counselling psychologists or others working with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. What social identity theory offers the counselling psychologist. then, are the insights that 'ethnic identity' rests principally on the psychological sense of belonging, and that it may become more or less salient, or even change in meaning across situations and contexts. For example, Rosenthal & Hrynevich (1985) studied ethnic identity in Greek-, Italian-, and Anglo-Australian adolescents; they found that ethnic identity is a multidimensional measure, which for Greek-Australians means association of cultural separateness with a positive valuing of own ethnic origins and for Italian-Australians means association of cultural separateness with a positive attitude towards assimilation; and Rosenthal, Whittle & Bell (1988) studied

ethnic identity in Greek-Australian adolescents across experimental conditions, finding that respondents in the positive (highlighting the advantages of ethnic group membership) and neutral conditions had a significantly more positive sense of ethnic identity than respondents in the negative condition who had to highlight the disadvantages of their ethnic group membership. Social identity theories are particularly good at explaining how minority and majority groups form and define themselves as such, yet they put too much emphasis on assimilation as a normative and natural process. In addition, they can be seen as paying too much attention to self-hatred, overlooking perhaps the wealth of culture and history that ethnic roots may offer.

Acculturation

Ethnic identity in this framework only becomes meaningful in situations when two or more ethnic groups are in contact over a period of time. In an ethnically homogeneous society, it is a virtually meaningless concept. *Acculturation* is the change in cultural attitudes, values and behaviours that results from contact between two distinct cultures (Berry, Trimble & Olmedo, 1986). Where ethnic identity is an individual phenomenon, acculturation is then a group phenomenon. Ethnic identity may be thought of as the individual concern with one's own group as a subgroup of society at large. The acculturation research originated in the investigation of the theme of culture conflict (Sherif, 1967). The theory suggests that hostility between two groups results from real or perceived conflicting goals which generate intergroup competition. Sherif demonstrated this theory with the famous 'Robbers Cave' experiment, where boys in a summer camp were split into two groups engaging in competitive activities with conflicting goals. Intergroup hostility emerged very quickly.

Acculturation has been formulated in two different models: a linear bipolar, and a two-dimensional. The linear bipolar model views ethnic identity along a continuum from strong ethnic ties at one end to strong mainstream ties at the other (Andujo, 1988; Makabe, 1979). The assumption made by this model is that a strengthening of one pole requires a weakening of the other. The two-dimensional model, alternatively, considers the relationship with the ethnic culture and the relationship with mainstream society along different axes. In this model, there are four possible orientations towards ethnic identity: acculturation (strong ethnic ties (A), strong identification with mainstream society(B)), assimilation (weak A, strong B), 'embeddedness' (strong A, weak B), and marginality (weak A, weak B) (Clark, Kaufman & Pierce, 1976; Hutnik, 1986).

The counselling psychologist's attention is also drawn to two empirical issues relating to ethnic identity that the acculturation framework has explored: the extent to which ethnic identity is maintained over time when a minority ethnic group comes

into contact with a dominant majority group (De Vos & Romanucci-Ross, 1982), and the impact this process has on individual psychological adjustment (Berry, Kim, Minde & Mok, 1987). However, the roots of this perspective in Sherif's (1967) intergroup conflict open it to the same criticism as that made by social identity theorists above (Tajfel, 1981), namely that *categorisation* into groups and ingroup favouritism is automatic and does not need to involve conflict or hostility, which thereforedo not need to express themselves intraindividually.

Psychodynamic Approaches

Counselling psychologists' formulations regarding ethnic identity are by far most influenced by this approach, which will be examined in more detail in a later section of this report. The psychodynamic perspective on identity in general was introduced in the works of Erik Erikson (1953, 1968). According to Erikson, many aspects of ego development can be formulated in terms of the growth of the sense of identity. He identified eight developmental stages of identity formation (the 'Eight Ages of Man'), which suggest that, following a period of experimentation and exploration (identity crisis) in adolescence and early adulthood, a decision or commitment is made in various areas of identity, including occupation, religion and political orientation. Here it is already possible to draw attention to the similarity of this description to what Gill (1996) calls "a classic tale of *revelation*, in which a new insight about the world is constructed as the origin of a fundamental *transformation*" (p. 150, italics same). The Eriksonian psychodynamic perspective on ethnic identity development has been applied to diverse populations, including black Americans (Cross, 1978), biracial persons (Poston, 1990), and generic ethnicity models (e.g. Phinney, 1989).

Identity Process Theory

Glynis Breakwell's (1986) identity process theory suggests that identity changes through two processes: *evaluation* and *assimilation* - *accommodation*. It suggests further that the desired outcomes of identity change are *increased self-esteem, personal continuity* (across time), *positive personal distinctiveness,* and *self-efficacy* (introduced in later work). Strategies for coping with threatened identities may subsequently be *intrapsychic, interpersonal,* or *intergroup*. Liebkind (1992) applies identity process theory to ethnic identity. She explains that ethnic identity is achieved through an active process of self-definition (assimilation and accommodation) and self-evaluation. She goes on to postulate an *objective* ethnic identity, which is defined and perceived by others and includes characteristics such as language, race, geographical location, religion, ancestry etc., and a *subjective* ethnic identity, which is self-defined and perceived and based on the *belief*

of common descent. These two structures have an interface, where identity negotiations take place. As an example, one intergroup strategy mentioned earlier is that of 'passing'. Here a person gains access to a high-status social group by camouflaging their own group origins (Breakwell, 1986). Watson (1970), writing during the time of *apartheid*, describes techniques employed by South African Coloureds to regain classification as 'White'. The person may be said to be manipulating their objective ethnic identity, perhaps at an intrapsychic cost. Objective ethnic identity projects itself as *alter-casting*, and subjective ethnic identity as *self-presentation.* It is at this level, of alter-casting and self-presentation, that the complex identity negotiations, which may be expected to take place between the culturally different counselling psychologist and client, need to be kept in mind as relevant to the therapeutic process.

As the child grows older, the reality of its ethnic status in the dominant culture becomes unavoidable. In terms of identity processes, the developing child is forced to assimilate and accommodate information ultimately detrimental to its self-esteem in the majority culture. Huyck & Fields (1981) find that, if and when ethnic identity problems occur, the most vulnerable age group is between 11-22 years. This is due to the alienating experience of being an ethnic minority during adolescence, allegedly the crucial years of identity formation. Liebkind (1992) explains that the identity of ethnic-minority youth develops in the conflicting pressure of four value and belief systems:

- the traditional culture of the parents,
- the culture of the 'host' country,
- the 'exile' community,
- the relevant youth culture.

Studying immigrant and refugee youth, Eisenbruch (1988) shows that the risk of psychological problems may increase and continue even in the third generation after arrival in a country. Culture conflict seems to manifest itself in tension within families, which in turn influences adolescent adjustment. In their book on ethnic minorities and psychiatry, Littlewood & Lipsedge (1989) review evidence from various disciplines and conclude that British society is "a serious hazard to the mental health of black and ethnic minorities." However, the fact of belonging (or not) to more than one cultural group has confusingly also been seen in research as advantageous, and this is reflected in education: Rotheram & Phinney (1987) in their 'synthesis model' argue that children raised in two cultures have greater role flexibility, flexibility in cognitive style, adaptability, and creativity.

Liebkind (1992), quoting Breakwell, emphasises that theorising about identity is "like traversing a battle-field" (p.147). There will never be a single adequate academic discipline to provide satisfactory explanations for all the phenomena involved. Much

research still explicitly or implicitly "reproduces racisms" by treating culture and ethnicity as peripheral to the main issues, and by focusing on the identity of the minority group members rather than the majority (Phoenix, 1996). It seems that Liebkind, while giving central place to culture and ethnicity as issues, is positing a difference between 'objective' and 'subjective' ethnic identity, both represented intraindividually, and suggesting that the former originates in the definitions supplied by others, while the latter originates in one's own understanding. In doing so, she may be reinforcing the powerlessness of the minority experience and locating conflict within the individual (who should presumably resolve the conflict by accepting others' definitions or bringing their own understanding closer) rather than in the false and conflicting preconceptions about what 'race' and 'ethnicity' are within society itself, lived realities of everyday existence. In other words, she is locating the interface of ethnic negotiation within the individual: "in a developmental perspective, all ethnic-group members have the option to explore and resolve issues related to their ethnicity, although they may vary in the extent to which they engage in this process, individually or collectively" (p. 180). Although very aware of the broader social framework, she does not question the *definitions* of terms such as race, geographical location, ancestry etc. From a post-modern perspective, it is in negotiating the social construction of the *meaning* of such terms that people from both majority and minority cultures 'resolve issues': 'race' in one context may mean something quite different in another.

It is worth mentioning here that research on methodological nationalism which has since taken place in the 21st century (e.g. Wimmer & Schiller, 2002), has correctly identified the erroneous assumption of the naturalness of the nation / state / society underlying much postwar social science research, and justly advocated new concepts of analysis which are not coloured by methodological nationalism. In effect, this means that researchers should not assume ethnic identity to be the main social status being studied and should be open to observing and taking into account their research participants' own self-understanding and self-identified key statuses as being of primary importance to the research.

Summary of Approaches to Ethnic Identity

In summary then, it can be seen that the main approaches to the study of 'ethnic identity' are each investigating a different meaning of the term, with some commonalties. In social identity theory, 'ethnic identity' is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1981; p. 255). This division between a cognitive, self-identification aspect and an affective sense-of-belonging aspect of ethnic identity can be seen reflected in Liebkind's (1992)

identity process theory approach to ethnic identity, namely in the cognitive processes of assimilation-accommodation and the affective process of evaluation: "It appears that self-definition, a sense of belonging and pride in one's ethnic group may be key aspects of ethnic identity that are present in varying degrees, regardless of the group." (p. 181). The acculturation framework provides a slightly different definition of 'ethnic identity', viewing it instead as the direct intraindividual response to *actual* social conflict between a majority and a minority culture. And psychodynamic approaches seem to naively ignore the many-layered (gender, birthplace, age, class, education, context etc.) social nature of identity which the other frameworks have been shown to suggest, seeing 'ethnic identity' instead as an essentialist truth the healthy person must attempt to achieve.

The inclusion in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM III-R, American Psychiatric Association, 1987) of two disorders for which lack of identity development is a central aspect (Borderline Personality Disorder and Identity Disorder) suggests the danger of pathologizing already disadvantaged members of society such as ethnic minorities is very real. It has been interesting, therefore, to observe that since that time, the DSM progressed to redefining 'identity disorder' as 'identity problem' (1994) and in the latest version (DSM-V, 2013) has removed the 'identity problem' category altogether. While this could be perceived as progress in terms of limiting the scope for labelling in terms of mental health, it may paradoxically also render the afflicted communities invisible, making their continuing and very real social and psychological difficulties harder to identify. The limitations of the different approaches to ethnic identity, and their political implications, need to be borne in mind by the counselling psychologist attempting to formulate for a client's apparent identity strivings.

Models of 'Ethnic Identity' Development: Single, Dual or Multiple Heritage?

Single-Race Models

Sarbin and Scheibe (1983) state that no single heuristic device is likely to conquer the whole problem of identity. Correspondingly, several models of ethnic identity development have been proposed. Phinney's (1989) ethnic identity development model (EID) took the Eriksonian psychodynamic perspective to account for development across ethnicities. Cross & Fhagen-Smith (1991) offer a four-stage model of 'nigrescence', or black identity. Atkinson, Morten and Sue's (1979; 1983; 1989) five-stage Minority Identity Development Model (MID) tried to extract the core elements common to all minority groups.

Writing from a North American perspective, the Racial / Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) model is a refinement of Atkinson, Morten and Sue's (1979; 1983; 1989) five-stage Minority Identity Development Model (MID), presented by Sue & Sue (1990). The authors stress that it is not an attempt at a comprehensive theory of personality, but rather "a conceptual framework to aid counsellors in understanding their culturally different client's attitudes and behaviours." (p. 95) It defines five stages of development that oppressed people experience in a roughly linear fashion as they struggle to understand themselves in terms of their own culture, the dominant culture, and the oppressive relationship between the two cultures: *conformity, dissonance, resistance/immersion, introspection* and *integrative awareness.* Interestingly, Sue & Sue also apply their model separately to 'white identity development'. I give below a brief summary of each stage for 'black' clients, and the main implications for therapeutic practice, which unfortunately are only explicitly stated for 'black' clients.

- *conformity*: a black client implicitly approves of white culture more than black. Self and ingroup are depreciated, as are other minority groups. Client will be hostile to a black therapist, compliant to a white therapist. 'Passing' may be used as a defence.
- *dissonance*: a black client becomes aware of inconsistencies between dominant-held views and those of their own group. There is conflict between a self-appreciating and a self-depreciating attitude.
- *resistance/immersion*: a black client becomes self- and ingroup-appreciating, but there is conflict between feelings of empathy for other minorities and preoccupation with own culture. The dominant outgroup is depreciated. A white therapist will experience hostility and resistance.
- *introspection*: the previous unequivocal nature of self-appreciation and other-deprecation is questioned. Clients at this stage are receptive to self-exploration.
- *integrative awareness*: there is self-appreciation and group-appreciation, other minority groups are also appreciated, but a selective attitude is maintained towards the dominant outgroup. Attitudinal similarity between client and therapist is seen as more important than group membership.

One of the main difficulties with the R/CID model, despite its authors' apparent wish to stress its non-generalisable nature, is that like all psychodynamic Eriksonian stage models of identity development, it contains the notion of *achieved identity*, in this case expressed as the final 'stage' of integrative awareness. Achieved identity is described by Cross and Fhagen-Smith (1989) as being the stage when "there are signs that the person's exploration period is a thing of the past and that the ethnic identity has been

achieved; the habituated identity shows signs of being effectively integrated into the person's overall self-concept and worldview" (p. 111).

Even Erikson himself suggested that the identity cycle recurs across the lifespan when confronted with new challenges. Parham (1989) suggests that the process does not necessarily end with ethnic identity achievement, but may continue in cycles that involve further rethinking or exploration of the role or meaning of one's ethnic identity. The above description of achieved identity suggests a complacent, and again intraindividual resolution of ethnic identity, but by doing so once again places the onus on the individual to resolve their conflicts over ethnicity, diverting attention away from the genuine need for social attitude change. Its political ramifications may even suggest that individuals who are engaged in political activism are in a 'lower', conflictual stage of identity negotiations themselves. It is understandable why psychologists do this: in the consulting room they have only one individual to work with, not the whole of society. The counselling psychologist can perhaps avoid the intraindividual bias that psychodynamic models suggest by being willing to take the clients' claims about experiences of racism, or comfort with one's own identity, literally at face-value.

It should be borne in mind that ethnic identity can be a source of conflict, and yet also bestow advantages. Researchers have frequently reported that older individuals are more likely to be in an achieved identity status than younger people, and evidence shows that increasing age and a wide range of life experiences help individuals develop cognitive skills. This combination of age, life experiences, and improved cognitive skills helps adolescents and young adults find their authentic selves (Branch, 2001). Adolescents with strong commitments to their ethnic identities also tend to explore these identities more than their peers (Meeus, 2011).

Dual-Race Models

Phinney (1990) writes: "a significant problem that has been virtually ignored in research is that of people from mixed backgrounds. There has been little documentation of this growing phenomenon, and it has been difficult to study, as many subjects identify themselves as members of one group, even though they have a mixed background." (p. 511). Empirical studies have found that biracial offspring often experience difficulties with gender confusion, self-hatred, alcohol and other drug abuse, suicide, delinquency, alienation, denial of self, as well as racial self-identity (Benson, 1981). On a more positive side, studies have also found that biracial youth are more adaptable, resilient and creative (Gay, 1987; Johnson & Nagoshi, 1986; Poussaint, 1984).

It is perhaps not surprising that biracial people and people of mixed heritage in general may feel forced to comply with one label in a society where identity logic rules

(see Introduction). Investigating the social marginality of biracial people, Brown (1990) goes as far as to suggest that the social and psychological dilemma they embody leads to the creation of a 'biracial personality', a dual personality possessing a dual social and psychological consciousness. He writes:

> whereas 'whole race' persons develop a relatively linear identity in that their internalised cultural values and self-concepts are reinforced and affirmed by society, biracial persons experience a distinctively different process based upon simultaneously possessing two cultural frames of reference. As a result, biracial persons undergo basic changes in this process and reconstruct their basic self-image as well as their position, role and status in an ongoing way throughout their lifetime (p.320).

Here the dualistic identity logic in psychodynamic models of ethnic identity development seems to be falling apart. A both/and logic would be much more appropriate than either/or. Cretzer & Leon (1982) noted that there was a tremendous increase of interracial and interethnic marriages in the U.S. in twenty years prior to their research, and these numbers have been growing steadily ever since, although racially mixed marriages remain the minority of marriages in the US (Rico, Kreider & Anderson, 2018). This also poses the question of who is 'marginal' and, therefore, at risk. Despite this, Poston (1990) has developed a progressive developmental model of biracial identity development with five stages:

- *personal identity*: possess identity primarily based on personal factors such as self-esteem within the primary reference group;
- *choice of group categorisation*: pushed to choose the identity of one ethnic group, while not yet cognitively capable of multiculturalism. Usually choose according to group status and parental support. Choose to avoid alienation;
- *enmeshment/denial*: feel confusion and guilt at having to choose an identity not fully expressive of one's background;
- *appreciation:* begin to appreciate multiple identity and broaden reference group orientation; still, however, tend to identify with one group;
- *integration*: recognise and value all of their racial identities, develop a secure, integrated identity.

It can be seen that the above model is very similar in its structure and narrative pattern to the Racial/Cultural Identity Development model described above, and, therefore, open to similar criticisms. Poston himself recognises the model as "tentative and based on the scant amount of research on biracial individuals and information from support groups that serve this population" (p. 153). Interestingly, Kerwin, Ponterroto, Jackson & Harris (1993) studied racial identity in biracial children using qualitative methodology (semistructured interviews) and their "findings ran counter to problems conjectured

in the counselling and related literature" (p. 221). Their participants did not appear to perceive themselves as 'marginal' in two cultures, and demonstrated sensitivity to the views, cultures and values of both parent communities. It may then be suggested that different methodologies produce different kinds of knowledge about populations.

Hence, the methodology used in designing such models needs to be addressed, not least by the counselling psychologist using them in formulating a clients' difficulties. The use of single quantitative measures of ethnic identity has given way to multidimensional investigations and more qualitative approaches in a search for refining a complex topic (Bat-Chava, Allen, Aber and Seidman, 1995). Sue and Sue (1990) base the methodology they used in deriving R/CID on client observation and specific measures of ethnic identity such as the Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS) (Parham & Helms, 1981). This may suggest that there is both the limitation of single-case studies in nomothetic research (how far one can generalise out from a single client to a population) and the difficulty that a reliable measure of ethnic identity has not yet been found, the reliability of such measures being often unreported or low enough to raise questions about conclusions based on them (Phinney, 1990). Phinney notes that less than a fifth of studies reported any reliability at all, and measures used are probably tapping into different components of the construct.

Sue and Sue (1990) also note that there is a strong need for refinement of such models - how, for example, do other factors such as class, age, gender, physical characteristics etc. interact with ethnic identity development? The complexity of such interactions can be seen in a study by Furnham & Kirris (1983), investigating the interaction between self-image disparity, ethnic identity, and sex-role stereotypes in British, British-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot adolescents. They found not only an interaction with gender, but also with such an apparently 'intrapsychic' construct as self-image disparity (the difference between perception of actual self and ideal self).

The Social Construction of 'Ethnic Identity'

A postmodern perspective on social science, such as the social constructionism espoused by discourse analysts (Sampson, 1989; Potter, 1996), asserts that language is not just a means of communication about an underlying reality ultimately transcendent to it; instead, language *constructs* the very reality we are talking about. The 'building blocks' available to us for this construction come from the semantic pool of vocabulary and syntactic and grammatical rules that constitute what are acceptable and meaningful ways of saying things.

Postmodernism casts doubt on the attempts of scientists to discover underlying realities. Horrocks & Jevtic (1997) point out that discourses are not just linguistic systems or texts - they are *practices.* Perhaps then, even the well-meant models of ethnic identity development and empirical studies of ethnic identity in diverse populations described above are the product of social-science discourses emanating from a social order which may be politically motivated in maintaining outgroups. The famous structuralist Roland Barthes, in an essay on a photography exhibition depicting pictures of ethnically different people, writes:

> first the difference between human morphologies is asserted, exoticism is insistently stressed, the infinite variations of the species, the diversity in skins, skulls and customs is made manifest… then, from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically produced: man is born, works, laughs and dies everywhere in the same way; and if there still remains in these actions some ethnic peculiarity, at least one hints that there is underlying each one an identical nature… of course, this means postulating a human essence, and here is God reintroduced into our Exhibition… everything here, the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some 'differences' which we shall here quite simply call 'injustices' (1973, pp. 107-8).

What has so far been rather loosely termed 'ethnic identity' has been applied to diverse populations; critically analysing models of development of single-race and dual-race (biracial) populations and studies done on minority populations or exile-community populations, it can be seen there is a consensus among social scientists that an acceptance or 'integration' of ethnic heritage into identity is normative and healthy. The dualistic premises this assumption rests on can perhaps best be demonstrated in models of biracial identity development, as the biracial person can be seen as the incarnation *par excellence* of the possibility of a living 'split', put in the language of psychodynamics. Barthes' 'God' may be also found in psychologists' wish for integration of elements socially and structurally incompatible within a unified 'personality'.

Talking specifically regarding the R/CID, Sue and Sue (1990) recognise that "there is an implied value judgement given in almost all development models. It is clear that all cultural identity models assume that some resolutions are healthier than others" (p. 117). Here it can be noted that social constructionist approaches to identity are harshly critical of developmental models for making precisely this assumption. Social constructionism departs from mainstream psychological interest in identity as a personal and 'subjective' account of the self (where the counselling psychologist may provide the 'objective' account) and focuses instead on the social and political functions different accounts serve.

Kitzinger (1989) critiques models of lesbian identity development from both the psychodynamic and 'liberal humanistic' perspectives and convincingly argues that "identities are not primarily the private property of individuals but are social constructions, suppressed and promoted in accordance with the political interests of the dominant social order" (pp. 94-95). Much like Barthes does in the above passage, she argues that the liberal humanist attitude towards sexual orientation ('love has no gender') serves to deny the differences of lesbians, trivialising their sexuality by emphasising their personhood. Interestingly, Marsella and Pedersen (1981) indicate that one of the countertransferential errors a white therapist might make in working with a black client is precisely the same: the illusion of colour-blindness, as if colour is not an issue. The threat that difference poses to "the reified institutions of the dominant moral and social order" (Kitzinger, 1989; p. 86) is thereby depoliticised. The request made by psychologists, for example, for the biracial person to 'integrate' his or her disparate and socially factional 'halves' into "a secure, integrated identity" (Herring, 1995; p. 33) can be seen as the same attempt to make him or her conform to "the reproduction of the Western worldview" (Sampson, 1989; p. 15), which sees the ego as master in its own household, paralleling theories of governance and authority in the Western world.

The same criticism can be made of the fetishisation of phenotypic appearance on which we base our understanding of ethnic diversity. Gilroy (1995), in discussing the rise of concern with Black identity at the core of Black sociopolitical concerns, demonstrates that identity politics "expresses a mode of individuation that is central to the mechanics of racial domination, rather than a means to overcome it" (p. 16). The more Blacks differ from each other, the more this identity politics suggests that their differences do not count. This "implosive obsession" (p. 16) with racial identity diverts attention from the more socially pertinent issues of material, ideological and sexual differences. Importantly for counselling psychology, Gilroy goes on to argue that "this type of essentialism represents the wholesale substitution of therapy for political agency…the appeal to identity has become little more than an alibi for racial narcissism and a license for ethnic absolutism" (p. 17). It seems that the tendency to believe that all members of an ethnic group are the same, a high risk for counselling psychologists working with culturally different clients (d'Ardenne & Mahtani, 1989), is also a risk for people from different cultures concerned with issues of identity. What at first appears to be theories which try to restore the self-esteem of the socially oppressed furnish us with the very same rhetoric that led to oppression - the Western sovereign self: "theories of Black identity in the modern world have been regularly implicated in the struggle to stretch and amend modernity so that it could accommodate the hopes of slaves and their descendants, postcolonial peoples and other marginalised groups" (p. 17). Theories of 'ethnic identity',

then, far from serving the culturally different, may be reaffirming some of the worst stereotypes, right on line with the imperialist project of modernity.

Earlier in this report, the issue of the complex, interactive nature of 'ethnic identity' with other variables was briefly discussed as posing a possible challenge to simplistic and essentialist notions of ethnic identity. Fortunately, this complex and interactive nature is being increasingly recognised, often in the feminist literature. Hansen & Gama (1996), for example, address gender issues in multicultural counselling, providing a rationale for the interaction between gender and other cultural components. If gender is itself a social construction - children have no gender at birth, just "minimal biological differences in sex organs and hormones" (p. 77) - and different gender roles are ascribed across different cultures, then the worlds of men and of women will be different across cultures. They also indicate that much of the research on ethnic identity has omitted the contribution of women. Arredondo, Psalti & Cella (1993) point to the importance of citing within-group differences, such as those between women of Chinese, Japanese and Filipino heritage, who in the West may be labelled grossly as 'Asian'. They advocate telling women's stories from specific cultural groups to provide less stereotype accounts (e.g. *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan, 1989; *The Colour Purple*, Walker, 1982). Gilroy (quoted above) also suggests an intimate link between gender, imperialism and ethnicity in quoting Malcolm X as "a limited symbolic restoration of the forms of Black manhood that white supremacy denies," and that the subnational, national and supranational theories of identity are held together by the force of masculinity.

Conclusions for the Counselling Psychologist

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in 2017, 65.6 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide because of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations alone. Given the rate of influx of populations from differing ethnic backgrounds in Europe and globally, the issue of ethnic identity cannot be overlooked by counselling psychologists or others in the mental health professions, and it is likely to increase in significance as second and third generations of the children of refugees grow towards adulthood in their host countries.

The implicit complexity and inherent diversity within the very notion of 'ethnic identity', as discussed above, require epistemological flexibility in the methodology of approaches which are adopted for helping with this issue. This report has focused on the challenge that taking mainstream research findings and mainstream psychological theories of 'ethnic identity' for working with the culturally different client presents to the counselling psychologist. It is asserted that a social constructionist framework for

understanding may be more appropriate to the culturally sensitive counselling psychologist who is reflectively aware of the political implications of the meanings of terms and theories he or she uses. The strengths and limitations of four main approaches to research on ethnic identity have been discussed: social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), acculturation (originating in the works of Sherif, 1967), psychodynamic approaches (originating in the works of Erikson, 1968), and identity process theory (Breakwell, 1986). All of these approaches have something to offer to the counselling psychologist working with cultural difference. Social identity theory draws our attention to the importance of assessing a client's sense of belonging and how their 'ethnic identity' may become more or less salient or even change in meaning across situations and contexts. Caution is recommended in that social identity theory tends to contribute to an understanding of assimilation as healthy and normative, by emphasising self-hatred and underplaying the benefits of different heritage. The counselling psychologist's attention is also drawn to two empirical issues relating to ethnic identity that the acculturation framework has explored: the extent to which ethnic identity is maintained over time when a minority ethnic group comes into contact with a dominant majority group, and the impact this process has on individual psychological adjustment.

Identity process theory has made a useful distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective' components of ethnic identity that may be pertinent to therapy. Liebkind (1992) points out that "it is usually psychologically uncomfortable to disagree strongly with other people about the content and value of one's own identity" (p. 163). In the light of this, it could be recommended that her distinctions between 'objective' (as perceived by others) and 'subjective' (as defined by the client) ethnic identities are discussed with the client, also paying attention to the political implications of each ('alter-casting') - for example, a piece of fictional client-therapist dialogue informed by this concept may be:

T: *You say it is difficult being black. Is that how others have defined you, or how you define yourself?*

C: What do you mean?

T: *Do you define yourself as a 'black' person or are you defined that way by others?*

C: Well, I guess I've never given it much thought. I suppose primarily I'm just me, but my skin colour is 'black'. My mother's from Kenya and my father is Jamaican - so these are two different cultures anyway.

T: *So perhaps it's convenient for others to lump you under one heading, 'black'.*

C: Mhm. Damn it, you're probably right. But what can I do about it?

Most models of the development of ethnic identity in use in therapeutic practice, however, come from the psychodynamic perspective. Based on dualistic identity logic, such models have been critically analysed and found wanting as heuristic tools, especially when

a person's lines of heritage are more than single. Embleton-Tudor & Tudor (1994) write about power, authority and influence in psychotherapy, and their analysis of power issues and difference has much to offer the counselling psychologist who is concerned about using such models. They indicate further that although the *abuse* of power in therapy has been well documented, there seems to be a dearth of research analysing its *positive* use, since power is an inevitable and not necessarily unhealthy social reality. They also caution against the separation of the personal and political which is tempting for counselling psychologists and other therapists working with difference. Difference is highlighted and emphasised in the psychodynamic tradition, and underplayed in the humanistic; the political implications of issues of difference, in this particular report focusing on ethnic identity, but applying also to other sources of identity such as sexuality, gender, and social class, need to be explored and negotiated with the client.

Social constructionist approaches to psychology are offered as being more appropriate for such negotiations, and having a direct impact on the relationship between the counselling psychologist and client, via the counselling psychologist's understanding and formulation for the client. Lonner & Ibrahim (1996), for example, give a brief account of the assessment process from a constructionist perspective when working with 'ethnic identity', which suggests a liberalisation of the methods and techniques used to assess personality and pathology, using methods such as: (a) content analysis of a client's spoken or written narrative, (b) discourse analysis of interactions within a group, (c) analysis of journal work in which the client maintains "conversation with self", and (d) use of the Repertory Grid Technique (Kelly, 1955). They also advocate the use of projective techniques in cross-cultural assessment, which give the counselling psychologist an idea of how clients construct their own reality.

Finally, it can be seen that the approach towards identity which is offered through adopting a social constructionist perspective promotes the reflective awareness of the post-modern counselling psychologist, and indeed anyone working in a helping role. Understanding 'ethnic identity' as a social construct means it is no longer understood as an essentialist "ghost in the machine," to use Arthur Koestler's (1967) phrase. Instead, it is seen as a language-based concept, a social construct varying across contexts and situations, applied to populations which are different both within and between, and interdependent on other structural variables such as gender, class, sexuality etc. The methodology of mainstream empirical studies on ethnic identity would therefore be supplemented with a positive input from the counselling psychologist's qualitative research methods and reflexive contributions to therapeutic practice.

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