In Search of Common Threads: Linking Multicultural, Feminist, and Social Justice Counseling Paradigms

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Multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling theories are often viewed as disparate helping models. This article examines the complementary nature of these models and discusses the need to promote a clearer understanding of the ways in which these common threads can be used in counseling practice.

Several experts in the field have asserted that the counseling profession has always been concerned about promoting social-environmental changes that foster healthy human development, especially among those persons who are adversely affected by social injustices (Arredondo & Perez, 2003; Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007; Marsella, 2006). From the work of Frank Parsons in the early 1900s to the rise of the multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling movements in that latter part of the 20th century, numerous counseling professionals have demonstrated a commitment to foster positive changes among the individuals with whom they work as well as the social-environmental contexts in which their clients are situated (Toporek, Gerstein, Foud, Roysircar, & Israel, 2006).

Despite the commitment many counselors have historically placed on addressing such issues, it is equally clear that the counseling profession has increasingly directed more time and energy in assessing and ameliorating what are viewed as individual deficits and problems rather than engaging in environmental change efforts. In doing so, many counselors primarily strive to help clients develop new dimensions of their human potential by learning new coping strategies that enable them to more effectively deal with environmental stressors (J. Morris, personal communication, April 26, 1999; Torres Rivera, Phan, Garrett, & D’Andrea, 2005).

In contrast, not only do counselors who operate from multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling paradigms direct time and energy toward stimulating positive changes among the individual clients with whom they work, they also strive to intentionally ameliorate social injustices that adversely affect the mental health of larger numbers of persons in oppressed and marginalized groups in contemporary society. This involves directing attention to the complexity of culture as well as a broad range of issues related to gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual/affectional orientation, power relations, sociopolitical factors, injustices, and various forms of cultural oppression when working with their clients (Sue, 2001; Vera & Speight, 2003).

Although the multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling movements are similar in terms of the emphasis they place on fostering individual and social-environmental changes, they have often been viewed as disparate paradigms by many counselors in the field. This article is designed to help counselors understand the common threads that link these three major theoretical forces. By describing the common threads that are shared by multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling theories, we hope that counselor educators and practitioners will more clearly understand the strengths that cut across these paradigms and incorporate these common threads in their work.

Addressing the Concepts of Privilege and Unintentional Injustice

One of the common threads that multicultural, feminist, and social justice counselors share is the view that clients exist within and are constantly affected by environmental systems and contexts. A second concept that connects these theoretical perspectives is the acknowledgment that effective helping requires developing a keen awareness and knowledge of the ways that various forms of injustice, oppression, discrimination, marginalization, and social-cultural privileges adversely affect the lives of millions of people in contemporary society (Arredondo & Perez, 2003).

As used in this article, the term privilege refers to the systematic and unearned benefits select groups of persons in society are bestowed based on specific variables. These variables are consistent with various characteristics manifested among persons in the dominant group in society. This includes but is not limited to one’s racial/ethnic/cultural background, gender, socioeconomic class standing, age, sexual orientation, and physical/mental ableness, to name a few. More specifically, the existing social order in the United States not only provides a broad range of unearned privileges and benefits to White, middle- and upper-class,
heterosexual, English-speaking, and able-bodied males but does so in ways that disempower individuals who do not manifest these variables (McIntosh, 1992). Such unearned privileges underlie much of the injustice that is perpetuated in this nation.

Some social injustices continue to be intentionally perpetuated, that is, carried out with the conscious intent of maintaining the privileged social status and position of the dominant group at the expense of persons in other devalued groups. Many injustices, however, are unintentionally perpetuated by many well-meaning individuals in privileged groups (Bell, 1997; McIntosh, 1992). Unintentional forms of injustice and oppression are commonly manifested when individuals in privileged groups disregard the negative impact that systemic forms of discrimination and inequities have on millions of persons in marginalized groups in contemporary society.

Unintentional injustices commonly occur when individuals are complicit in silently allowing oppressive cultural, organizational, and social policies and practices to continue to operate unabated in different environmental contexts. Examples of such unintentional injustices include situations (a) in which persons who are able-bodied and in managerial and supervisory positions repeatedly convene meetings at workplace settings that are not easily accessible for persons with disabilities, (b) when men perpetuate the objectification of women by using sexualized images of women in marketing promotions, and (c) when counselors use culturally and racially biased tests and measurements in their work with persons in different cultural and racial groups.

Counselor education programs have begun to address issues of privilege and the unintentional perpetuation of injustices in contemporary society in multicultural, feminist, and social justice courses. As a result, students are able to develop a more comprehensive perspective of some of the factors that contribute to clients’ psychological challenges and problems that are not addressed in traditional counseling training programs.

The increasing impact of the multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling movements over the past 35 years has also led many experienced practitioners to reexamine how these factors affect their clients’ lives and the work counselors do in the field. As a result of reassessing these issues, counseling practitioners are able to liberate themselves from a myopic view of counseling that has historically overemphasized an individual, intrapsychic approach and move to more comprehensive, culturally respectful helping methods that include strategies to foster a greater level of social justice in their clients’ lives.

Defining Social Justice and Social Justice Counseling

Although the term social justice has been defined many ways, Rawls (1971) stressed the importance of two basic tenants when describing the meaning of this construct. These tenants are (a) the maintenance of equal rights and fundamental liberties (individual justice) and (b) the equitable distribution of resources, profits, and opportunities to those with the greatest need (distributive justice). In this definition, Rawls clarified that justice affects both the personal and social domains of human existence. The notion of promoting the common good of individuals and groups is another essential concept that Rawls emphasized in his definition of justice.

Drawing upon Rawls’s (1971) work, we emphasize that social justice counseling represents a unique and multifaceted approach to mental health care in which counselors strive to promote human development and the common good by addressing issues related to both individual and distributive justice. Social justice counseling represents a multifaceted approach to counseling in which practitioners strive to simultaneously promote human development and the common good through addressing challenges related to both individual and distributive justice. Social justice counseling includes empowerment of the individual as well as active confrontation of injustice and inequality in society because they affect clientele as well as those in their systemic contexts. In doing so, social justice counselors direct attention to the promotion of four critical principles that guide their work: equity, access, participation, and harmony.

Equity

As a key principle of social justice counseling, equity is defined as the fair distribution of resources, rights, and responsibilities to all members of society. In defining the term equity in this way, one must make a distinction between what is equitable and what is equal. Treating people equally does not necessarily equate to treating people equitably. For example, typical legal responses to a 24-year-old caught shoplifting are not equal to the typical legal responses to a 9-year-old caught shoplifting. These responses are commonly adjusted to fit the developmental levels of the two individuals. At the same time, these two individuals cannot expect equal rights in society, such as the right to vote or to drive a car.

Social justice counselors are aware of the effects that inequities have on their clients’ lives, and they direct attention to those environmental-contextual situations that place clients in unfair situations that can be traced to inequities that clients are subjected to in contemporary society. For instance, if female clients are noted to have their mental health compromised as a result of being subjected to sexual harassment at the workplace, feminist and social justice counselors implement a multifaceted helping approach that addresses both individual concerns and environmental stressors. This multifaceted helping approach is likely to involve providing services that attend to issues of individual concern (e.g., providing counseling services that help clients address the anger, frustration, depression individuals commonly experience as a result of the conditions they encounter at the workplace) and implementing intervention strategies that focus on the broader systemic factors adversely affecting these clients’ mental health (e.g., advocating for the amelioration of workplace sexual harassment).
When counselors work with people whose sense of psychological well-being is negatively affected as a result of being subjected to various forms of harassment, discrimination, and marginalization, it is important that they have a clear understanding of the contextual issues at play in their clients’ lives. From a multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling perspective, the situation briefly described earlier calls for counseling approaches that are aimed at fostering the personal empowerment of the individual client (McWhirter, 1994) as well as implementing advocacy services to foster positive environmental changes at the workplace. The latter services occur when the counselor advocates with or on behalf of the client to address the environmental conditions that are the source of the client’s difficulties (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D’Andrea, 2003). To effectively implement such a counseling approach, counseling and counselor education programs need to assist students in understanding how clients’ personal empowerment can be nurtured in individual counseling settings as well as to teach students how they can advocate with and on behalf of clients who experience inequities, marginalization, and oppression.

**Access**

Access is a principle of social justice that includes notions of fairness for the common good that are based on the ability of people to access the knowledge, power, resources, and services that are crucial to realizing a standard of living that allows for self-actualization and self-determination. The valuation of this principle hearkens back to the Bill of Rights that was drafted on the assumption that people have certain inalienable rights by virtue of being human. This includes every person’s right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. However, when people from marginalized and devalued groups experience environmental barriers that systematically undermine their ability to access the knowledge, power, resources, and services that would allow them to gain control over their lives, they cannot be expected to function as effectively as those with more privileges that enable them greater access to these forms of social capital.

Access is an important principle that is relevant for the work multicultural, feminist, and social justice counselors do because the lack of fair and equitable access to knowledge, power, resources, and services has been found to directly affect the welfare of many racially and culturally different clients and female clients (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D’Andrea, 1998; Lewis et al., 2003). For example, children who are not provided with equitable access to education because they primarily speak a language other than English experience a form of social injustice that is grounded in the denial of access.

Multicultural counseling experts have pointed out that counselors who primarily focus on helping these youngsters cope with the stressors and frustrations that are caused by such injustice are viewed as functioning as “handmaidens of the status quo” and “tools of oppression” (Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996, p. 24) when they avoid addressing the root cause of the youngsters’ difficulties and inadvertently allow the injustice to persist unabated. In such cases, counselors merely serve to perpetuate social injustice when they intervene only at the microscopic level of helping by assisting individual students to learn new ways to deal with their educational problems while not striving to remedy the systemic problem that underlies students’ frustrations in this regard.

**Participation**

Participation is another important social justice principle that refers to the right of every person in society to participate in and/or be consulted on decisions that affect their lives as well as other persons in their environmental systems. The systematic denial of the right to full participation in decision-making processes in school, university, employment, and community settings has long been a Civil Rights issue in this nation. In this regard, it is noted that it was not long ago that women and African Americans were denied this participatory right by not being allowed to vote in the United States. Another form of historical injustice that resulted in the violation of many people’s right to full participation in society relates to the manner in which Asian Americans were denied the right to U.S. citizenship in the past.

Although these examples of systemic oppression are grounded in the denial of people’s right to participate in basic civic responsibilities and opportunities, they are no longer in play in this nation. However, other situations continue to exist that undermine the right to full participation among many persons in marginalized and devalued racial/cultural groups. For instance, it was not until the 2006 national elections that Muslim Americans had a representative from their own ethnic/cultural group elected as a representative to the U.S. Congress. This lack of participation continued to exist despite the fact that there are more than 4.7 million Muslim Americans in the United States (“The 2005 Annual Megacensus of Religions,” 2005).

When individuals are not permitted to participate in processes that influence their lives, they often lose a sense of control. This can result in a loss of hope, a sense of helplessness, and an increased sense of personal and collective disenfranchisement. Such losses can serve to lessen their motivation to actualize their human potential within the existing sociopolitical context. Multicultural, feminist, and social justice counselors are aware of the impact that this sort of disenfranchisement has on many people’s emotional health and physical well-being. Such awareness is based on an understanding of the existence of barriers, such as institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism as applied in schools, workplaces, and other public utilities. These barriers serve to undermine the ability for full participation of many persons in marginalized and devalued groups from having an equitable voice in the decision-making processes that affect them. An example of this in U.S. history is the disenfranchisement of many citizens in the right to vote based on variables such as
race, gender, and income. Voting rights have been blocked and curtailed throughout the history of the United States, in a systematic manner, since its inception. Originally, only land-owning White men were allowed to vote, then eventually Black men, and then women. Once all citizens were allowed the right to vote, obstacles such as literacy tests and poll taxes were instituted, both of which were administered inequitably. This trend of disenfranchisement continues, because even very recently, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states may require photo identification of all those who wish to vote, a move that can serve to deter those citizens too poor, elderly, or differently abled from voting.

With this awareness in mind, multicultural, feminist, and social justice counselors use the counseling relationship to support clients’ empowerment. Counselors often do this by (a) educating clients on issues related to their participatory rights and (b) helping clients develop practical strategies that they are encouraged to implement in situations where they are adversely affected by being denied full participation, specifically, in the decisions and environmental/organizational processes that are implemented in the schools, universities, workplaces, and communities where these clients study, work, and live. These counselors also work to help clients connect with other people and resources available in their communities that might be useful in further enhancing their clients’ sense of empowerment.

Multicultural, feminist, and social justice counselors often times deem it necessary to advocate with and on behalf of their clientele to increase opportunity for just participation in different environmental systems (e.g., in schools, universities, workplaces, community settings) that deny this social justice principle. In this regard, we point out that some human service agencies set policies and make decisions that affect the types and timing of services offered to clients without allowing these clients a say in the decision-making process. The denial of this sort of participation lessens the likelihood that human service agencies will take into account the viewpoints, cultural perspectives, or contextual challenges that characterize the lives of many of the clients whom these agencies are designed to serve. Counselors with a multicultural/feminist/social justice orientation would likely work with and on behalf of their clients in this situation to advocate for the development of new organizational policies that effectively result in a greater level of clients’ participation in the organization’s decision-making processes.

Harmony
The final social justice counseling principle discussed in this section involves the notion of harmony. In this context, the term harmony is defined as a principle of social adjustment wherein the self-interest of any individual or group produces results that afford the best possible outcomes for the community as a whole (Marsella, 2006). This principle is based on the assumption that social justice exists under conditions that take into account the needs and rights of all the people that compose society. From this perspective, individual rights are considered in the context of needs of society at large. In other words, if an individual’s desires ultimately serve to harm or limit the freedoms and needs of others, the individual is responsible for sublimating these desires in the interest of promoting a more harmonious environment that reflects respect for the common good.

In a socially just society, individuals are willing to make short-term sacrifices with the faith and understanding that such sacrifices will ultimately address and maintain the best interests of all persons concerned, including the persons making such sacrifices (Gostin & Powers, 2006). For example, many individuals who have no children in public schools pay taxes to support public education. The transfer of this money does not directly benefit these individuals or their families, but it serves the needs of society at large. Such individual sacrifices ultimately create a society that is well-educated and productive, thus ultimately serving the best interests of everyone in that society.

Counselors operating from a multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling perspective continually strive to update their understanding of the interplay of various environmental systems, contexts, and groups on their clients’ mental health and psychological well-being. The counselors do this in part to expand their understanding as to how competing interests might be addressed in ways that result in more harmonious, fair, and equitable outcomes.

Clients who are a part of different marginalized and disenfranchised groups commonly end up competing with each other in trying to secure equitable access and participation in decision-making processes related to the provision of resources and services that all people deserve. This is particularly true in a society that is designed to maintain an unjust status quo by serving the wants and needs of persons in more privileged and powerful racial/ethnic/cultural groups. In the United States, more relative privilege is given to people who are White, heterosexual, upper-middle-class, able-bodied, Christian, male, and cisgendered (i.e., having gender identity or performing in a gender role that society considers appropriate for the individuals’ biological/physical sex) and who speak English as their primary language (Smith, Foley, & Chaney, 2008). Social justice counselors work to foster a greater sense of harmony by promoting the empowerment of all clients, especially those persons from marginalized cultural groups, in an effort to help build a more just and healthier society by guaranteeing the rights for full equity, access, and participation of all persons in society.

From a multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling perspective, the rights of women need not be perceived as competing with the rights of people of color. Nor should either of these groups’ rights be viewed as being in competition with individuals considered sexual/affective minorities. With this in mind, multicultural/feminist/social justice oriented coun-

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counselors strive to foster the empowerment of all people while placing a particular emphasis on those persons in positions of less relative power and privilege.

Strategies commonly used by these counselors include advocating for the development and implementation of organizational/social change policies and practices that are intended to result in more just, equitable, accessible, and harmony-building outcomes. This includes but is not limited to negotiating with key policy makers (e.g., administrators in human service agencies, school principals, employers) to guarantee that clients’ rights for greater equity, access, and participation are respected and incorporated into the situational processes that affect clients’ health, development, and well-being. Multicultural/feminist/social justice oriented counselors also work to (a) identify barriers to the well-being of the clients, students, and vulnerable groups they work with and then (b) develop and carry out plans with these individuals and other allies to confront and eradicate such barriers. These and many other related empowerment strategies are outlined in the Advocacy Competencies that have been formally endorsed by the American Counseling Association (ACA; Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, in press).

Empowerment and Advocacy: Cornerstones of a Multicultural/Feminist/Social Justice Helping Approach

The Importance of Facilitating Client Empowerment

The term empowerment has been often used in descriptions of multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling models (Toporek et al., in press). Counselors who strive to facilitate the empowerment process as defined by these theoretical models work to assist their clients in developing new strengths, knowledge, and abilities to the point that these clients do not require the assistance of mental health practitioners or other comparable service providers.

When used in the context of multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling, the process of facilitating clients’ empowerment involves five basic components that McWhirter (1994) initially outlined in this area. Building on McWhirter’s original work, we note that empowerment strategies from a multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling perspective first involve taking a course of action that is intentionally designed to increase the awareness of persons in marginalized and devalued groups about the power dynamics that are at work in their life contexts. This includes increasing people’s awareness of the ways in which social and institutional barriers and injustices adversely affect individual clients and their group’s mental health and well-being.

Second, multicultural/feminist/social justice counselors assist clients in becoming more empowered by helping them develop specific skills that are necessary to gain reasonable control over their lives and life context within the constraints of their environments. To achieve these ends, multicultural/feminist/social justice oriented counselors work with their clients to develop a greater level of critical consciousness. This is accomplished by stimulating an increased understanding of the various forms of oppression that continue to be perpetuated in contemporary society (especially those forms of oppression that adversely affect clients’ lives) as well as by assisting clients to become more knowledgeable of the economic/sociopolitical/psychological implications that result from being oppressed (Gutierrez, 1995). When these goals are accomplished in multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling situations, oppressed individuals are better able to reject the negative propaganda that is disseminated through the dominant society that lessens the perception of inequality in society (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000). In addition to working to nurture this sort of crucial consciousness, multicultural/feminist/social justice oriented counselors also assist their clients in developing a positive identity that includes a greater appreciation and acceptance of clients’ self- and group-referenced identities (Duran & Duran, 1995; Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007).

Third, the empowerment process that is reflected in successful multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling interventions results in clients (a) coming to a more accurate understanding as to how and where they can exercise increased individual control in their lives and (b) acquiring new skills that enable them to secure support from other allies who are committed to constructively confronting institutional barriers to their health and well-being (Crethar, Bellamy, Bicknell-Hentges, & Giorgis, 2002). As clients develop improved awareness and skills in these areas, they become increasingly capable of standing up to the injustices that they face in their lives. For example, a woman who has become increasingly empowered as a result of working with a multicultural/feminist/social justice oriented counselor might actively manifest new behaviors that request other people to refrain from using sexist language, especially in her company. This client might also seek the support of other like-minded coworkers in addressing the manifestation of other forms of institutionalized sexism in her workplace.

Fourth, we note that clients realize new dimensions of their personal empowerment when they are able to develop and exercise aspects of their new developed consciousness and behaviors, described earlier, without infringing on the freedoms or rights of others. This aspect of client empowerment complements the principle of harmony that underlies the philosophy of social justice counseling that was described earlier in this article. It also underscores the notion that people are not truly empowered if their newfound power comes at the expense of others who are subsequently marginalized or oppressed by their empowerment.

Finally, clients demonstrate heightened levels of empowerment when they work to actively support, encourage, and develop the empowerment of others in their community.
(McWhirter, 1994). Supporting, encouraging, and developing the empowerment of other persons in the community requires counselors to operate as advocates in individual and small-group counseling situations as well as in other environmental settings where counselors implement their skills as psychoeducators, consultants, organizational development advocates, and social change agents. These services are designed to increase clients’ level of critical consciousness (when implemented in individual counseling situations) and ameliorate unjust and oppressive conditions (when used outside of individual counseling settings).

Using Advocacy Strategies in the Service of Clients

As used in the present article, advocacy is defined as proactive efforts carried out by counseling professionals in response to institutional, systemic, and cultural impediments to their clients’ well-being. Counselors with a mind-set toward client advocacy not only think in terms of remediation of problems in individual clients’ lives but also direct time and energy to implement preventive helping interventions and services that are intentionally aimed at promoting a greater level of social justice by fostering systemic changes in clients’ environmental contexts.

The set of skills and services that counselors commonly use when implementing intervention strategies to achieve the aforementioned outcomes is best delineated by the Advocacy Competencies that have been developed and endorsed by ACA (Toporek et al., in press). In the development of the ACA Advocacy Competencies, it was noted that counselors need to become familiar with the effects of political, economic, social, and cultural factors on human development.

Counseling professionals who desire to become competent as advocates need to develop a greater awareness of their own beliefs, attitudes, and biases as they relate to the impact that sociopolitical factors have on marginalized and underserved populations. The effective and ethical implementation of advocacy services in practice requires multicultural/feminist/social justice oriented counselors to (a) become knowledgeable of the different categories of advocacy that are outlined by ACA and (b) acquire the skills that enable them to successfully implement these advocacy strategies when striving to stimulate positive changes in clients’ personal development and environmental systems (Toporek et al., 2006).

The ACA Advocacy Competencies distinguish how counselors can act with as well as act on behalf of their clients by describing three levels of advocacy intervention (Toporek et al., in press). These include advocacy competencies that are useful to implement at the individual client/student level, the community/school level, and the public/societal level.

At the individual client/student level, counselors work with their clients in individual counseling situations to help them develop the critical consciousness and skills that underlie a person’s empowerment. In doing so, social justice counselors intentionally strive to assist their clients in acquiring new psychological, cognitive, interpersonal, organizational/social change competencies that are necessary to enable persons from marginalized and devalued cultural groups to advocate on their behalf. Until clients have developed the competencies that are necessary for them to advocate on their own behalf, multicultural/feminist/social justice counselors articulate their willingness to advocate on their clients’ behalf if and when clients may feel that such advocacy is useful in helping them to overcome the challenges that they are facing in their lives.

Advocacy competencies that are associated with community/school level interventions involve helping interventions that reflect counselors’ commitment to work for and on behalf of the specific community/school from which their clients come. This typically includes consulting with other allies in their clients’ communities about the ways that mental health professionals can be supportive in advancing the ongoing empowerment of these communities.

Advocacy at the public/societal level involves the implementation of different services including but not limited to the use of public education interventions. Such educational services are aimed at increasing the general public’s awareness of the adverse impact of social injustices on the lives and well-being of millions of persons in contemporary society. These public education services are often complemented by the use of consultation and lobbying interventions with organizational policy makers and elected officials. These advocacy services are used by many multicultural/feminist/social justice counselors to promote changes in organizational-institutional policies and the enactment of new laws that help to eradicate the various injustices and cultural oppression that many persons in marginalized and devalued cultural groups routinely experience in their lives.

Highlighting Other Commonalities Between Multicultural, Feminist, and Social Justice Counseling

A number of factors contribute to the need for counselors to expand their professional roles to include the sort of advocacy and empowerment services described earlier. One major factor contributing to this recognized need involves the rapid diversification of contemporary society and the complex challenges that people face living and working in such a society (Morrow, Haxhurst, Montes de Vega, Abousleman, & Castañeda, 2006).

Another factor that contributes to the need for counselors to engage in the implementation of a broad range of empowerment and advocacy services involves the growing recognition of the limitations and inappropriateness of using counseling theories that emerge based on White, male, Eurocentric, middle-class perspectives, values, and cultural biases. Traditional counseling theories have shied away from alternative worldviews and social justice issues that affect the mental health of millions of minority clients in the United States (Torres Rivera et al., 2005).
As noted earlier, the rise of the multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling movement has been largely predicated on the need to address the limitations and cultural biases associated with traditional counseling theories (Ivey, D’Andrea, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2007). Although multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling theories have historically been viewed as disparate helping frameworks, counselors are encouraged to consider the utility of developing a more integrated view of these helping models given their commonalities.

 Whereas the previous sections of this article have highlighted some of the common threads shared by these helping theories, the remaining sections of this article provide additional information about theoretical similarities that link these perspectives together. We have done this to invite counselors to consider the utility of integrating various aspects of these counseling perspectives in ways that are likely to result in more positive and lasting outcomes for larger numbers of clients in the future.

Highlighting Common Threads Linking Feminist Theories With Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Models

The genesis of feminist counseling and therapy theories can be traced to the women’s movement that gained increased power and influence during the 1960s and 1970s (Evans, Kincade, Marbely, & Seem, 2005). The concepts that distinguish feminist counseling and therapy theory from traditional counseling theories include the following:

1. The belief that clients know what is best for their own lives
2. An emphasis on the importance of educating clients about the counseling process
3. A focus on educating clients about the need to be engaged in social action
4. The perspective that individual problems exist in sociopolitical and cultural contexts
5. The assertion that individual change best occurs through social change
6. A perspective that highlights the view that clients are not passive recipients of counseling services but active agents who are encouraged to implement new action strategies aimed at having a positive impact in their environmental contexts (Remer, 2008)

Feminist counseling and therapy theories are embedded in a number of principles that complement multicultural and social justice counseling perspectives. Between these counseling theories, one clear similarity is the emphasis these perspectives place on the notion that every person is political by the nature and the degree of his or her participation and oppression in society. Operating from this common theoretical thread, multicultural, feminist, and social justice counselors believe that it is important to discuss the need to promote social-political-environmental changes within the counseling context. This is an important helping principle because multicultural, feminist, and social justice counselors readily acknowledge that counseling interventions that primarily focus on intrapsychic issues without also exploring ways to promote positive social-political-environmental changes commonly result in the temporary alleviation of client symptoms and not more lasting developmental outcomes that are supported by healthier environmental conditions.

A second common thread linking multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling theories is the notion that the helping process needs to be characterized by the development of an egalitarian relationship between the counselor and the client. This common theoretical thread illuminates the importance for counselors to be ever vigilant of the ways in which mental health professionals might unintentionally misuse their power in the counseling relationship by making interpretations or offering advice that is not consistent with the client’s personal-cultural values or life experiences. Multicultural, feminist, and social justice counselors acknowledge the power imbalance that is inherent in the counseling process and discuss its impact on clients in an effort to reduce the potential negative effect of the counselor–client power differential.

The third common thread noted in multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling theories and practices is the important role counselors play in validating clients’ experiences of oppression and discrimination. Although feminist counselors commonly focus on issues related to gender-based discrimination and violence, multicultural and social justice counselors typically direct attention to a broad range of injustices and their impact on clients’ mental health and sense of psychological well-being. This includes but is not limited to validating the adverse effects of racism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, ableism, and other forms of cultural oppression on clients’ lives.

A fourth common thread in multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling is the manner in which counselors from these theoretical orientations reject the “disease model” of counseling and therapy. In all three counseling perspectives, the intrapsychic and internal disorganization of the individual is seen as part of a larger, more complex system of distress, meaning that the disorganization is a symptom rather than the cause of the client’s manifested problems.

Highlighting Common Threads Linking Multicultural Theories With Feminist and Social Justice Counseling Models

In 1996, an attempt was made to develop a comprehensive metatheory of multicultural counseling and therapy (MCT; Sue et al., 1996). This metatheory is composed of a number of assumptions and propositions that shed light on the complex process of working with culturally different people. The six major theoretical propositions that underlie the MCT metatheory are briefly described as follows.

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Proposition 1. MCT posits that every counseling theory and therapy, whether Western or indigenous to non-Western cultures, reflects a particular worldview. This proposition underscores the importance of recognizing that counseling theories and therapies (whether they are grounded in Western or non-Western worldviews) are neither right nor wrong, good nor bad, but rather a product of the mind-set and culture in which they were created (Sue et al., 1996).

In a similar manner, social justice counseling practitioners embrace the notion that there are multiple ways of promoting mental health and psychological liberation. Rather than viewing one helping approach as the “best” method to achieve these outcomes, social justice counselors emphasize the need to implement helping strategies that are respectful of and complementary of clients’ worldviews, values, and life experiences.

Proposition 2. Counselor and client identities are sourced from and situated within individual, communal, and universally shared experiences as well as the individual, familial, and cultural contexts of their lives. Like MCT practitioners, feminist and social justice counselors focus on the interrelation of these experiences and contexts because they may affect the counseling relationship (Sue et al., 1996).

Proposition 3. Counselor and client attitudes toward self and others are strongly influenced by their level of cultural identity development, which may be expressed through feelings and behaviors as well as in relation to dominant–subordinate groups and cultures. Where counselors and clients are operating, in terms of their cultural identity development, affects how they view each other, discuss aspects of the problem presented in multicultural counseling situations, and establish goals for the helping process (Sue et al., 1996).

Feminist counseling theorists also emphasize the importance of having counselors consider how their own sexual/gender identity may be similar to or different from their clients’ identity development in this area. In doing so, these practitioners are better able to understand how their own gender biases may affect the helping process and avoid allowing such biases to unintentionally result in ineffective, negative, or even harmful psychological outcomes. By reflecting on their own and their clients’ identity development in this area (as multicultural counselors do in assessing their clients’ ethnic/cultural identity), feminist practitioners are able to intentionally match helping strategies that better fit clients’ level of psychological development in ways that foster more deliberate, effective, and respectful growth in the helping process (Daniels, 2007).

Proposition 4. No counseling approach is universally appropriate for all clients. Recognizing this point, MCT counselors understand that it is vital to tailor the objectives, goals, and helping interventions to complement the client’s cultural values and personal experiences. Like feminist and social justice counseling approaches to helping, MCT is intended to expand the counselor’s range of helping responses, regardless of the practitioner’s preferred theoretical orientation (Sue et al., 1996).

Proposition 5. MCT acknowledges that the traditional one-on-one remedial model of counseling that dominates the mental health professions in contemporary Western society is just one of a broad range of helping frameworks that persons in different cultural groups have historically implemented to promote mental health and human development. This proposition highlights the need for counselors to implement a wide range of helping roles and behaviors that are commonly used in many cultures when working to promote the mental health and psychological development of persons in multicultural situations. These roles and services are similar to those recommended by feminist and social justice counseling theorists, and they include the use of consultation and advocacy, organizational development, social change, and preventive education/life training services, all of which need to be done in a culturally competent manner (Sue et al., 1996).

Proposition 6. Multicultural counseling experts point out that Western counseling services have traditionally directed an inordinate amount of time and attention on stimulating clients’ self-actualization, behavior modification, and the resolution of unresolved past problems as enacted in the present. Like feminist and social justice counseling theories, MCT provides an alternative perspective of the counselors’ role by encouraging practitioners to direct additional attention to clients’ psychological liberation (Durán, Firehammer, & Gonzalez, 2008). A brief description of the types of counseling strategies that are designed to promote clients’ psychological liberation includes those helping interventions that are intended to expand clients’ awareness of the impact that cultural, economic, educational, political, and social factors all have on human development.

Using a psychological liberation approach in MCT, feminist, and social justice counseling situations requires counselors to move beyond primarily working to increase clients’ understanding of and ability to self-actualize as separate and autonomous beings to fostering a self-in-relation or the self-in-context consciousness (Comstock et al., 2008). This necessitates the implementation of services that reflect constant consideration of clients’ values, worldviews, and contexts, including the use of diverse healing practices by persons in different cultural groups (Sue et al., 1996).

As briefly described earlier, these six fundamental MCT propositions presented by Sue et al. (1996) complement feminist and social justice counseling theories in a number of ways. One common thread noted among these perspectives is the emphasis that all three theoretical frameworks place on the need for counselors to use different roles and services when attending to the multiple identities clients have developed as a result of their individual, group, and societal contextual interactions and experiences.

In placing this emphasis, multicultural, feminist, and social justice counselors direct attention to the transactional rela-
tionship that exists between (a) the multiple identities that all individuals develop as a result of their cultural-environmental-contextual experiences and (b) the impact that persons operating from different levels of identity development can have in changing the cultural-environmental contexts of which they are a part. By focusing on the transactional nature of the mutual impact of all of these factors, multicultural/feminist/social justice oriented counselors better understand how these experiences shape clients’ attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors as well as gain insight into potential ways that clients might effect positive changes in their environment. With this understanding in mind, counselors are challenged to consider how and why they might focus on various dimensions of clients’ multiple identities in helping clients realize new and untapped aspects of their psychological liberation.

**Conclusion**

Although they are often viewed as disparate theories, the common threads that exist between multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling theoretical approaches to helping are illuminated in this article. In doing so, we highlight the need for counselors to embrace new professional roles as they implement a broad range of services aimed at promoting the mental health of persons from diverse groups and backgrounds in contemporary society. Among the common services multicultural/feminist/social justice oriented counselors are encouraged to provide include those that foster clients’ empowerment and psychological liberation.

To achieve these outcomes, multicultural/feminist/social justice minded counselors implement new approaches to individual counseling that are intentionally designed to foster the development of an egalitarian helping relationship, in which counselors and clients collaborate in deconstructing clients’ problems from a contextual perspective and coconstructing specific goals for counseling. In addition to implementing this helping strategy in individual counseling settings, multicultural/feminist/social justice counselors are also committed to implementing a broad range of advocacy services with and on behalf of their clients.

One of the overarching commonalities implicitly and explicitly reflected in many of the common threads within multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling and advocacy services is the willingness of practitioners to embrace their roles as environmental-organizational-institutional change agent and sociopolitical activist. Multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling theorists emphasize that all counseling is political (Lewis, Arredondo, Crethar, & Plunkett, 2004). As noted in this article, the political nature of counseling is reflected in a couple of fundamental ways. One way political factors play into counseling endeavors is when counselors primarily focus on assisting clients in learning new ways to cope with environmental-contextual stressors without also directing attention to ways in which counselors and clients can address negative environmental factors, in general, and various forms of social injustice and cultural oppression many clients from marginalized and devalued groups routinely encounter in their lives, in particular.

A second way sociopolitical factors are addressed in counseling is when counselors implement a multicultural/feminist/social justice counseling approach in their work. As explained throughout this article, these helping approaches necessarily involve examining how clients and counselors can work together to develop strategies that are designed to stimulate both individual client as well as environmental-contextual changes. Although the latter counseling approaches require counselors to explicitly state the value that multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling models place in promoting human development in the aforementioned ways, the former approaches are implicitly political in the sense that they encourage clients to adapt to the existing sociopolitical status quo. Thus, one of the central differences between these counseling approaches is the lack of discussion about the implicit political implications of using traditional counseling models in the helping context.

By outlining the common threads that underlie multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling approaches in this article, we hope that counselors will not only become more knowledgeable about these similarities but also consider ways that they might incorporate various aspects of these theories into their own professional practices. In doing so, these counselors will be better able to communicate greater understanding, acceptance, empathy, and respect for clients from marginalized and devalued groups and will bring to counseling and be better positioned to foster the mental health, empowerment, and psychological liberation of these clients in ways that help build a more sane and just society in the process.

**References**


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