

Cross-Generational Counseling Strategies: Understanding Unique Needs of Each Generation

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Changing demographics require counselors to understand differing client worldviews, cultural backgrounds, as well as related historical events and experiences. This article provides a snapshot of historical events and generational differences as they relate to communicating with and counseling a diverse population. Values, skills, concerns, and differences between generations are discussed along with challenges that might be faced when working with persons from within each cohort. Culturally appropriate cross-generational counseling strategies for enhancing client rapport, development, and well-being are suggested.

Keywords: diversity, generational cohorts, cross-generational counseling

Because lack of counselor knowledge, proper attitudes, and inadequate multicultural counseling skills can impede the establishment of rapport and counseling outcomes, counselors must consider diversity not only through differing races, ethnicities, and genders, but also through age and generational perspectives (Ahmed, Wilson, Henricksen, & Jones, 2011; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). The American Counseling Association’s Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies establish that “multicultural and social justice competent counselors develop knowledge of historical events and current issues that shape the worldview, cultural background, values, beliefs, biases, and experiences of privileged and marginalized clients” (Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development [AMCD], 2015, p. 7). Currently, all four different generations of counselors including Traditionalists (born prior to 1940), Boomers (born between 1940-1964), Generation X (born between early 1960s-1981), and Millennials (born between

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early 1980s and 2004) work with individuals from within the four aforementioned generations plus a fifth generation known as Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2012). Working with such a diverse group of clients may create anxiety and age-based misunderstandings. Counselors must, therefore, attain understanding and learn strategies to effectively participate in cross-generational counseling sessions.

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the complexities and challenges associated with cross-generational counseling and offer practical strategies for counselors to better serve clients from various generational backgrounds. An overview includes terminology and the historical occurrences faced by each generation as well as a literature review detailing unique events and experiences faced by each generation. Practical counseling strategies based on diverse value differences, unique abilities, diverse challenges and client concerns is later discussed.

Generational Categories

When considering cross-generational counseling, two aspects must be considered. The first, the history-graded cohort, refers to the common historical timing of individuals' births. Each history-graded cohort experiences unique historical events and circumstances (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016). The second consideration is that of age-graded differences. These differences refer to biological and/or environmental determinants that correlate with chronological age. Issues such as puberty, middle age, menopause, and high school graduation are experienced at similar times by the same group of people (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). Each of these differences affect generational values, preferences, and worldview. The following sections detail generational categories that encompass these aspects.

Traditionalists

The Traditionalists, also known as the Silent Generation, Veterans, or the Greatest Generation, were born before World War II ended in 1945 amidst the hardship of the Great Depression and experienced many historical events (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lipscomb, 2010; Nicholas, 2009; West Midland Family Center, 2008). For example, the Great Depression and World War II are two of the most influential history-graded events experienced by the Traditionalists. The stock market crashed in 1929 leading to 10 years of severe economic depression, and finally, to World War II in 1939. Though the United States initially hoped to remain neutral, it entered the war in 1941 after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Four years later, Germany surrendered and the U.S. dropped two atomic bombs on Japan to secure victory. At the war's conclusion, the U.S. ushered in the newly established United Nations and enjoyed great economic growth in its new role as an international leader. These historical events resulted in Traditionalists' parents espousing sociocultural values of conformity, self-sacrifice, discipline, duty, hard work and morality (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 1999). These values were echoed in

the highly-structured classrooms of the time where the teacher was an authority to be respected and obeyed (Weston, 2001).

While these teachings led to an overall trust in and respect for education and authority, surprisingly, Traditionalists did not turn out to be blindly obedient and most did not pursue advanced education. The Traditionalist generation produced many leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and the second wave of the Feminist Movement, including Martin Luther King Jr and Gloria Steinem (Deeken, Webb, & Taffurelli, 2008; Mitchell, 2005; Zemke et al., 1999). Additionally, they comprise the least educated generation as most could secure a stable, well-paying job with only a high school education (Mitchell, 2005). Today most Traditionalists play the role of grandparent, and most females are widows (Mitchell, 2005).

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers are touted as being born somewhere between 1940 and 1964 (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Nicholas, 2009; Reynolds, 2005; U. S. Census Bureau, 2014; Weston, 2001). The start of the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement are prominent history-graded events shared by this generation. Baby boomers were born into an optimistic nation expanding both externally through greater influence on the international stage and internally through a richer concept of citizenry and individual rights (Kupperschmidt, 2000). After World War II, Baby Boomers experienced the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the Korean War in 1950, the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 (Zemke et al., 1999). Baby Boomers would later be drafted to fight the Vietnam War, taking the side of southern Vietnam against the Communist North. Meanwhile, on U.S. soil, tensions around civil rights mounted as *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* desegregated schools in 1954, and Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on an Alabaman bus in 1955 (Ferrara, 2014). In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech and the nation was shocked by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. His successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, signed the Civil Rights Act into law in 1964 (Ferrara, 2014).

Baby Boomers also witnessed many social changes. Due to the large number of persons born into the Baby Boomer generation, marketers targeted their wishes and needs, and public institutions (e.g., schools and universities) were restructured to support the population swell (Mitchell, 2005; Sperazza & Banerjee, 2010). Baby Boomers were the first generation to experience wide-spread television ownership and viewing in homes (Zemke et al., 1999).

Social aspects also played important roles in characterizing this generation. Unlike their parents, Baby Boomers’ report cards detailed whether they shared well with others or could work as part of a team. Sharing was a necessity with an unprecedented number of children attending school (Zemke et al., 1999). Also unlike their parents, Baby Boomers left unfulfilling marriages and publicly accepted nontraditional households (Segal Company, 2001; Zemke et al., 1999).

Driven is a common adjective applied to Baby Boomers as they sought career success and societal change (Deeken et al., 2008; Nicholas, 2009; Weston, 2001; Zemke et al., 1999). Baby Boomers are significantly more educated than their parents and have, relative to other generations, witnessed a professional history of great influence and prosperity (Segal Company, 2001; Sperazza & Banerjee, 2010). Many Baby Boomers aligned their desire to change society for the better with their career, preferring to work for an organization whose mission is to make a positive impact through just and humane methods (Weston, 2001). Baby Boomers marched alongside their predecessors at antiwar protests and civil rights rallies (Weston, 2001). However, Baby Boomers found themselves divided on many sociopolitical issues such as the Vietnam War. To this day, many Baby Boomers avoid discussing the Vietnam War amongst their peers to avoid heated debate (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Zemke et al., 1999).

Generation X

These individuals, born between approximately 1961 and 1981, faced historical events such as Watergate, the energy crisis, the Challenge disaster, corporate layoffs, the stock market decline, Operation Desert Storm, fall of the Berlin Wall, acts of terrorism, and the Jamestown mass suicide (Crowley, 2003; Jiří, 2016; Miller, 2011). Other terms used to label this generation are Post-Boomers, Baby Busters, New Lost Generation, Latch-key kids, MTV Generation and the 13th Generation (Taylor & Gao, 2014).

Generation Xers were raised by Baby Boomers and are viewed as being cynical and detached (Crowley, 2003). Xers' parents were idealistic; optimistic; questioned authority; were career driven; desired to be rewarded with money, title, or recognition; valued creativity; took risks; were independent; worked long hours; left their children home alone; were permissive; and discovered that lifetime employment was uncertain (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008). These factors and lifestyles resulted in a generation of children destined to experience weekly daycare visits and parental divorce. For this reason, they were nicknamed the "latchkey generation," a group raised without constant adult supervision.

The worldview of those from Generation X was influenced not only by absent parenting, but also by political and work-related factors. Comperatore and Nerone (2008) stated "Generation X grew up in a disturbing political environment, so they are suspicious of politics and may be cynical about the world around them" (p. 20). This is not surprising since they witnessed intense discrimination during The Civil Rights Act of 1964. Because of this legislation aimed at ending discrimination based on gender and race in hiring, promotions, and firing, women became more involved in the workforce and suitable child-care became an even larger issue (Harrison, 1989).

The media, technology, and fashion of the day also influenced Generation X. Miller (2011) stated, Generation X "is the first generation to grow up in the Internet Era" and may be "...the most extensively wired generation in American history" (p. 1). They were entertained by movies (i.e., ET), television shows (i.e., The Simpsons), and most likely owned a Cabbage Patch Doll growing up. This exposure to technology and media

influenced their selection of heroes to include famous athletes, recording artists, and actors. They made fashion statements through body piercings, tattoos, and functional clothing pieces (Baughman, et al., 2001).

This generation has been defined in both positive and negative terms when discussing their values, morals, and related cultural aspects. According to Asghar (2014), people in Generation X are individualistic, independent, “structured, punctual, linear” (par. 16) and “want the corner office and the trappings of success” (par. 13). Nonetheless, they are also often viewed as having poor work ethic when compared to Baby Boomers and will typically choose leisure activities over paid overtime work (Weeks, Weeks, & Long, 2017). Other negative connotations related to this population are selfishness, being materialistic, reckless, less patriotic (Howe & Strauss, 1993); and cocky or arrogant (Ratan, 1993; Sunoo, 1995). Comperatore and Nerone (2008) described this generation as sensitive to hype and insecurity; independent and self-reliant; not intimidated by authority; being outspoken; results driven and goal-oriented. They may take a situational view rather than seeing situations in black and white. On the other hand, research by Crowley (2003) stated most “GenXers” are optimistic, believe one person can make a difference, are concerned with people different from themselves, are interested in their community, and have a strong concern for family. Per Taylor and Gao (2014), this generation is still praised for being “savvy, skeptical, and self-reliant” (par. 12). They work hard, pursue continuing education opportunities, are family oriented, enjoy learning, and stay involved in cultural and athletic activities (Miller, 2011).

Today, Generation Xers are between 33 and 53 years of age and are in the prime of their working careers. In contrast to their parents who sought work for personal fulfillment, Generation Xers view work as based on tentative loyalty and see work as a challenge (Shaver & Diamond, n.d.). Unlike many of their parents, this generation found a way to balance work, family, and community relationships (Shaver & Diamond, n.d.). Perhaps this is because of the generational core belief that social relationships, staying active, and leisure time lead to happiness and life satisfaction (Miller, 2011).

Millennials

Several names coined for those individuals born between approximately 1980 and 2004 include, Millennials, Generation Y, Generation Next, Echo Boomers, Chief Friendship Officers, and 24/7's (Accius & Yeh, 2016; Oppawsky, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). This group is considered the “largest living cohort, comprising 83.1 million people”; and is “more racially and ethnically diverse than preceding generations” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015, p. 1). According to Deane, Duggan, and Morin (2016), American Millennials named the following as the most significant historic events of their lifetime: September 11, Obama’s election as U.S. President, the Iraq/Afghanistan wars, gay marriage, the technological revolution, the Orlando shooting, Hurricane Katrina, the Columbine shooting, the Sandy Hook Massacre, the Boston Marathon bombing, and the Great Recession. Other historical events that influenced this generation include: the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the

fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the opening of the World Wide Web to the public in 1993, and the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Between 2001 and 2011, other significant events occurred, such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002), the introduction of Facebook in 2004, the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, passage of the *Affordable Care Act* (2010), Occupy Wall Street, and the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2011. These events made a deep impact on how Millennials were raised and created a unique atmosphere throughout their childhood.

Parental divorce affected 1 of every 10 Millennials, with four being raised by single parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Perhaps this explains data indicating that only 1 in 5 were married when data was collected in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In contrast, however, this group claims to value parenthood and marriage above career and financial success (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Today, most Millennials are living in poverty and have high unemployment rates even though they are more educated than young adults were in the 1980's (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). They seek jobs that provide experience and opportunity, but will resign if the work setting is unsatisfactory (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2012). Millennials are loyal to their personal lifestyle and will not allow outside influences, including work, to disturb the balance (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2012).

Millennials believe their technology use, music/pop culture, liberal/tolerant attitude, intellect, and clothing style makes their generation unique (Pew Research Center, 2010). The Pew Research Center (2010) reported 75% of Millennials as having a social networking profile and over 80% as keeping phones within reach while sleeping. Millennials indicated utilizing social media through cellphones, laptops, and tablets to stay connected to others (Pew Research Center, 2014; 2017).

Generation Z

Individuals born between 1995 and 2012 are known as Generation Z (Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós, & Juhász, 2016; Oppawsky, 2016; U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2012). Other names for this generation are iGen, Centennials and Gen M (Oppawsky, 2016). This group is more diverse than the Millennial generation as over 50% are part of a minority or ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). They primarily rely on the Internet and videos (i.e., YouTube) to provide information rather than textbooks or manuals (Pew Research Center, 2014). Generation Z has never known a world without social media, smart phones, and the Internet. Consequently, they are accustomed to fast changing technology and learn experientially (Pew Research Center, 2014; Shatto, 2017). According to a survey regarding cell or smart phone ownership in 2017, 100% of all 18-29 year olds own either a cell or smartphone (Pew Research Center, 2017). Currently, there is a dearth of published literature on this generation since the majority have not even entered the work force. Much of the literature extends, compares, and projects viewpoints from the Millennial generation onto Generation Z.

As such, comparisons between Generation Z and the Millennials are evident in the

historical events both experienced. For example, both groups experienced the terrorist attacks on 9/11 which increased airport security and caused America to spend trillions during the War on Terror. The *No Child Left Behind Act* was signed into law in 2002 when some members of Generation Z were starting Elementary school and many Millennials were graduating. Like the Millennials, Generation Z utilizes social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Both groups witnessed school shootings as well as the emergence of school safety policies aimed at curbing violence (Gray, Lewis, & Ralph, 2015). Andrea, Gabriella, and Tímea (2016) commented that Millennials and Generation Z both desire the “freedom to use various technological devices and tend to multitask” (p. 92-93). Perhaps this explains their characterization as being educated, connected, technologically savvy, sophisticated, and ready to create their own futures. They have been described as future entrepreneurs waiting to make an impact with their multitasking technological skills (Shatto, 2017).

Needless to say, clients from Generation Z and Millennials have experiences and abilities that differ from their predecessors. These generations relate best to counselors who understand these differences and incorporate them into counseling sessions. The same can be said for Traditionalists, Boomers, as well as for those from Generation X. Multiculturally competent counselors not only know about the uniqueness of each generation but use strategies that take differences into account. Following is a discussion to aid counselors as they seek to utilize appropriate methods when working with clients from differing generations.

Practical Strategies for Counselors

The previous section discussed history-graded influences that impacted the world view of those born into each generation. These history-graded influences combine with age-graded effects to create unique populations with specific needs based upon generational membership. Following are suggested counseling strategies based on these influences that intend to enhance rapport and aid those from within each generation. Strategies involving informed consent, communication preferences, values regarding professionalism and respect, relevant physical accommodations, technological use, theoretical and educational preferences, differences in worldview, as well as career and financial considerations are discussed and linked with relevant counseling considerations for each generation.

Traditionalists

Paper-pencil system. As discussed previously, Traditionalists were born before the existence of personal computers, smart phones, or tablets. They turned to the radio for entertainment, news, and information. Therefore, having hard copies of informed consent paperwork and any other documents available for them instead of only providing electronic versions is helpful. A counselor might ask a Traditionalist his or her preferred medium for communication and not be surprised if texting is not an option. A counselor

should also be wary of any homework assignments that involve the Internet as Traditionalists are much less likely to use it than other generations (Mitchell, 2005). However, the number of tech savvy Traditionalists is rapidly rising so it is important to always provide options and never assume that a Traditionalist does not use electronics (Mitchell, 2005).

Age-graded accommodations. Counselors should be aware of the normative age-graded developments experienced by individuals in their 70s and older. Appropriate accommodations for age-graded physical development include larger fonts on informed consent and other documents, clearing meeting space of any tripping hazards, and ensuring that sessions are in a location accessible to those with limited mobility. It is important as a counselor, however, to recognize that though all Traditionalists are in late adulthood, they possess varying levels of physical and mental dexterity and a counselor should never make assumptions that a client cannot do something or needs extra assistance because they are of a certain age.

Professionalism and respect. Traditionalists respect authority (Nicholas, 2009; Weston, 2001) and are likely to expect counselors to behave in a formal, professional manner (Weston, 2001). Consequently, a counselor should refer to a client by formal title unless instructed otherwise (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016; Zemke et al., 1999), use good grammar, never swear, and be well-mannered and respectful in tone (West Midland Family Center, 2008; Weston, 2001; Zemke et al., 1999). Since Traditionalists are not likely to question authority, counselors should explain the nature of the counseling relationship and specifically request honest feedback regarding potential disagreements (Weston, 2001). Some Traditionalists may comply only out of respect or a sense of duty (Weston, 2001).

Theoretical explanations. A Traditionalist's counselor should explain the rationale and theoretical basis behind revealing thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Auclair, Epstein, & Mittelman, 2009). Traditionalists are prone to compartmentalization and may experience discomfort when expressing aspects of their personal life (Zemke et al., 1999). It may be beneficial for counselors to explain the theories from which they operate and how aspects of the client's life and experiences fit into the therapy model (Weston, 2001).

Acknowledgement of history and managing resistance. Counselors can acknowledge the breadth of history and insight a Traditionalist brings to a session. Recognize that Traditionalists survived the Great Depression, defeated the Nazis, and, thus, created the nation Americans enjoy today (Weiss, 2014; Zemke et al., 1999). Counselors can acknowledge the relevance of and pride in this history by asking Traditionalists to reflect upon strategies that were previously effective while also watching for reticence when asking these clients to try something new (Deeken et al., 2008; Weston, 2001; Zemke et al., 1999).

Step based instructions. Because Traditionalists did calculations by hand in math class, handwrote professional correspondence, and did not learn to multitask until later in life, they tend to prefer step-by-step instructions (Deeken et al., 2008; Weston, 2001). As a result, they are more likely than successive generations to experience “information overload” which is further exacerbated by age-graded cognitive and physical declines (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016; Mitchell, 2005; Weston, 2001). Counselors might focus on one topic at a time, be clear and intentional when changing to a new subject, and be as methodical as possible throughout the course of therapy.

Baby Boomers

Inquiring about capabilities. Baby Boomers currently occupy the spectrum of middle adulthood to late adulthood. Baby Boomers vary greatly in technological acuity, sandwiched between the least tech savvy generation and the first generation known for techno-literacy (West Midland Family Center, 2008). Asking whether a client prefers electronic or paper versions of homework and consent documents ensures client comfort without undermining capabilities and faculties.

Promoting teamwork. Due to historical influences, Baby Boomers tend to question authority and may challenge a self-proclaimed “expert” counselor who creates a non-egalitarian relationship (Deeken et al., 2008; Weston, 2001). Counselors might, therefore, empower these clients by promoting rapport through team work and using theories that lean toward “client as expert” (Kongwana, 2012; Weston, 2001; Zemke et al., 1999). Counselors should encourage collaboration while working with a Baby Boomer, providing as much choice and opportunity for input and feedback as possible (Kupperschmidt, 2000). To avoid non-egalitarian perceptions, Zemke et al. (1999) suggested that counselors refrain from referring to Baby Boomers as “sir” or “ma’am.” Rather, they contend counselors use vocabulary that fosters a sense of equality and teamwork.

Cultural sensitivity. Baby Boomers have not only challenged authority but also societal conventions concerning race, gender, and the traditional model of family (Segal Company, 2001; Zemke et al., 1999). A counselor should, therefore, not display cultural insensitivity, be politically incorrect, or use sexist language (Nicholas, 2009). A counselor should also not make any stereotypical assumptions about the constitution of a Baby Boomer’s family. Baby Boomers are more likely to be divorced or a member of a blended family than previous generations (Segal Company, 2001). Explaining to a Baby Boomer the competencies and the counseling profession’s dedication to positive social change could be a positive way to build rapport and respect for the counselor’s role.

Encouraging involvement. Baby Boomers value self-efficacy and believe they can control the course of their lives as well as the world around them (Weston, 2001). They want to solve problems and be the change that they wish to see (Zemke et al., 1999). A

counselor can motivate a Baby Boomer by identifying opportunities for the use of his or her unique, personal talents and skills in the face of current challenges.

Psychoeducational considerations. Baby Boomers' believe in life-long learning and self-improvement, (Zemke et al., 1999). Thus, framing counseling as an educational experience may lead to personal growth and motivate change. At the same time, a counselor should be wary that a Baby Boomer may have read multiple self-help books on whatever life issues they are trying to address (Rollins, 2008).

Generation X

Importing genuineness in lieu of formality. Generation Xers are currently between 36-56 years old. Because Generation X grew up skeptical of institutions, authority figures, and watching politicians lie, they are often skeptical and view the world with less formality than previous generations (Wiedmer, 2015). For example, unlike Traditionalists and Baby Boomers they find informal dress at work to be fun and motivating (Wiedmer, 2015). This means their counselors do not have to worry about wearing a suit and tie or dressing formally to gain respect when working with this population. Generation Xers are more concerned with the quality of the counselor rather than how he or she dresses.

Incorporating structure. It may be common that Generation X clients may need structure and direction during counseling sessions. They are work oriented and willing to learn, but need to be given tasks and see results (Anderson & Raine, 2012). Counselors might include homework assignments within their treatment plan and provide examples showing application of certain techniques during the session. Despite proficient short-term problem solving, this generation needs assistance recognizing how short-term decisions affect future outcomes (Anderson & Raine, 2012).

Technology education, training, and use. Technology is constantly changing and because Generation Xers are the parents of the technologically savvy Millennials and Generation Z, this group may need educational strategies to monitor their children. Counselors must, therefore, educate themselves in this area so they, in turn, can assist clients from Generation X seeking to utilize the latest technology. Use of technology has been touted as one method of improving family communication (Froeschle, Crews, & Li, 2011).

Career counseling. This population has been criticized for not having employment loyalty. Counselors would do well to recognize the rationale this generation holds for moving between jobs; they want to stay marketable and pursue a change in scenery if the job does not fit. Consequently, counselors might help Generation Xers navigate through potential mid-life career changes. Services such as career counseling, referrals to financial counselors, and visits with professionals who help with retirement planning may be in

order.

Millennials

Career, financial, and life skills. Millennials are currently experiencing age-graded developments that fall between adolescence and young adulthood. Consequently, this group may need career counseling and financial counseling to overcome student loan indebtedness and unemployment (Adkins, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Identity development, critical-thinking exercises, and decision-making skills may also be helpful (Keeling, 2003).

Reducing anxiety and assisting identity development. Education policies such as No Child Left Behind as well as expectations to participate in and excel in numerous extracurricular activities resulted in increased pressures for this generation at school and home (Keeling, 2003). Counselors who recognize the expectations America placed on this generation can help relieve some of this pressure and treat the consequential anxiety and depression. Some Millennials even allow parents to choose their college majors to eliminate additional pressure (Keeling, 2003). Counselors might help Millennials develop an independent identity by pointing out strengths, using career assessments, and offering decision empowerment.

Technology-based system. Because Millennials are comfortable with technology, counselors may choose to utilize relevant tools. This means utilizing social networking sites, smartphones when applicable, and becoming aware of personal biases regarding these tools. Culturally competent counselors gauge their own actions and reactions to technology and become familiar with technological language (American Counseling Association, 2014). An often-overlooked bias many well-meaning counselors portray is technological judgment. For example, counselors may unintentionally judge couples meeting via technology as poorly matched or make statements that demean issues that occur over the Internet.

Generation Z

Career counseling technology system. Generation Z members are currently between 5 and 22 years old. The oldest members of this group are about to graduate from college and enter the “real” world or continue their education. Careers are rapidly changing due to technology, which means new skills will be immediately needed despite constant educational endeavors. Counselors should be aware of these changes to help prepare Generation Z members for a successful future career.

Technology and speed system. This group consumes social media more than any other generation, enjoys learning information quickly, and can multi-task with great

efficiency (Pew Research Center, 2014). Counselors might consider the fast-paced mindset of this generation when designing counseling sessions and strategies. For example, online resources and quick homework assignments may become important tools for reaching this group. Counselors should be ready to provide support and encouragement as this generation matures and navigates the many negative and positive challenges technological advancement will provide.

Family technology counseling. Counselors should use family therapy to educate parents and children about social media. Parents must recognize how social media is influencing children and work on achieving a healthy balance between face-to-face and Internet connections (Hoffman, 2013; Selfout, Branje, Delsing, ter Bogt, & Meeus, 2009; van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engles, 2008). Children and parents should be educated on the pros and cons of consuming social media, and counselors can assist parents as they help their children become independent and view social media as only one form of healthy connection. Generation Z is a unique and diverse cohort and will have a significant impact on the world if given the opportunity to optimally develop.

Case Vignette

Ben is a 70-year-old heterosexual Caucasian male who presents for counseling. He says he “recently retired” and describes himself as “missing his career.” He says he gets up every morning feeling “old” and “wishes he had something to do.” He came to counseling because his wife was “pressuring him to do something besides mope all day.”

The competent counselor considers Ben’s background and generational cohort when selecting strategies. The fact that he is a Boomer is relevant and must be considered in all aspects of the sessions and when building rapport. Following is a depiction of how Ben’s counseling sessions might proceed.

First, the counselor recognizes that, as a Boomer, Ben may be comfortable using technology although this cannot be assumed. Rather than make assumptions, the counselor asks about capabilities as follows and develops teamwork by giving Ben options.

Counselor: I just explained the procedures we will follow in counseling. Would you prefer to read and sign the documents on my iPad or fill them out on paper? I can send an electronic copy or make a hard copy of the written documents.

Ben: I really don’t like using the computer so I think I will just sign it and get a copy.

As a Boomer, Ben might be best served using a teamwork approach with client as expert. For this reason and because Ben seems to need validation, the counselor chooses to empower Ben using a solution focused approach as follows.

Counselor: Tell me about your typical day.

Ben: I get up and quickly realize I have nothing to do. Frankly, I am bored. I worked in sales for over 45 years and was happy to retire. Now, I just feel like I don't contribute in any way.

Counselor: Forty-five years in sales is impressive. You must have many talents.

Ben: What good does it do if you don't use it? The world is going on without me. Frankly, the world is going downhill.

Counselor: What do you mean by downhill?

Ben: Oh, everything. Look at politics. Our roads are crumbling, schools are horrible, and nothing changes.

Because Boomers believe they can control the course of their lives as well as the world around them (Weston, 2001) and want to create change, the counselor begins to encourage Ben's involvement through integration of his talents and concerns. This involvement may also decrease Ben's boredom.

Counselor: I can see where your talents developed in sales could be helpful with some of these issues.

Ben: What do you mean?

Counselor: Tell me what you did in sales?

Ben: I met with clients and potential clients all day. They were great people. I explained their options and encouraged them to buy what was most practical, and sometimes, if all things were the same, what was best for me and my company.

Counselor: I can see where you have a gift of persuasion. Someone with the ability to persuade others could make tremendous societal changes. Has there been a time when you were involved in the community?

Ben: I once served on a committee at my son's school, but that was years ago. I did enjoy that though.

Counselor: It sounds like improving education is important to you.

Ben: Yes, it is very important.

To strengthen rapport and build on the psychoeducational considerations important to Boomers, the counselor explains the counseling profession's dedication to positive social change. The counselor also links counseling itself to education.

Counselor: I can certainly understand that. The counseling profession is all about social change and improving lives through education. In fact, counseling itself is often seen as a form of education.

The sessions end with Ben offering to research opportunities for involvement and return to discuss opportunities the following week.

Recommendations for Future Research

Many questions remain unanswered when discussing cross-generational counseling. While many within each generation present with common issues as described in this article, it is important to note that every individual is unique and may share common values and preferences with those from other generations. For this reason, additional research may uncover specific strategies for those presenting with cross-generational preferences. Perhaps a rationale for these differences among generations could be uncovered through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative research methods might determine the efficacy of theoretical approaches, strategies, and even statistically describe preferences among cohorts. Qualitative methods could reveal client perceptions of strategies suggested within each cohort. Research holds the key to understanding experiences within each generational cohort as well as determining the efficacy of targeted strategies.

Conclusion

Multicultural counselors are called to increase knowledge, attitudes, and skills when working within a diverse population. Clients from different generations exhibit unique worldviews that must be considered if optimal counseling outcomes are to be achieved. This article highlighted some of the differences between five different generations: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Counselors' awareness of these specific generational differences and overall diversity will benefit clients and help counselors become more receptive, respectful, and skilled.

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