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## **Counseling Skills in Intercultural Education: The Case of foreign seas immigrants in Greece**

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**Abstract:** This paper presents some points of view about the counseling psychology skills that are required in intercultural education context. This issue arises from the rather massive migration that has been observed in the European Union countries, since 2007, involving three million persons until 2015. Especially Greece has received directly the largest number of refugees, among the European countries, as the Southeastern “Gate” of European Union, amounting to 1.8 million individuals. This phenomenon causes extra considerations on behalf of the Greek counseling agencies and experts. The intercultural education infrastructures of Greece are very limited compared to the existing needs. Less than 0.2% of schools are intercultural ones, while approximately 10% of the country’s pupils are foreigners. In this context, many teachers often discriminate against pupils from other countries and very few schools, besides intercultural ones, dare to organize counseling and support meetings for immigrant parents. There is though a significant number of teachers who are calling for better and more in-depth information on both

general and intercultural counseling. The effectiveness of a counselor on intercultural counseling is based on cultural awareness and sensitivity to accept and respect the cultural differences, trying to overcome any inhibitory obstacle, such as language.

**Keywords:** counseling psychology, counseling skills, intercultural counseling, intercultural education.

## 1. Introduction

The European Union (henceforth: EU) countries are the destination of a rather massive migration, both internal from one European country to another and external from other continents. The number of immigrants that illegally entered EU in the period 2007-2015 reached 3,000,000 persons (Foskolou & Kyrimi, 2016, 23), with almost 1.8 million persons of them (60%) through Greece (Foskolou & Kyrimi, 2016, 21). After 2012, a large number of refugees arrived also in Greece from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (Kotzamanis & Karkouli, 2016). This phenomenon causes extra considerations on behalf of the EU and, in particular, of the Greek counseling agencies and experts in education and other social-care services. The related skills of those experts consequently need to be exerted in an intercultural context. These additional considerations are commented in the present paper that focuses on identifying intercultural counseling and on the skills required to effectively cope with the counselor's responsibilities. Its purpose is to understand the skills required for the counselor to successfully provide counseling services to pupils in the context of intercultural education, which is the field of expertise of the authors herein.

In Greece (data of 2009 in Christodoulou, 2009), there is a total of 15,174 schools of every level (from kindergarten to senior high-schools). From these schools, only 26 (0.17%) are intercultural schools (13 of primary education, 9 junior high-schools and 4 senior high-schools) that have been largely and practically converted into schools exclusively for foreigners, because Greek parents abandoned them fearing that the cultural diversity and linguistic peculiarity of the pupils negatively affects the level of learning (Christodoulou, 2009). Considering that more than 200,000 pupils (10% of the total school population in Greece) are foreigners or immigrants, in addition to the 60,000 illegal immigrants and refugees who have been trapped in Greece for the last

two years, compared to how few the intercultural schools are, then taking immediate measures for intercultural education seems more than ever to be imperative (Foskolou & Kyrimi, 2016, 78-79). Nevertheless, research conducted both in Greece and the EU concludes that many teachers often discriminate against pupils from other countries. They reproduce stereotyped concepts and ideas for the education of immigrant and refugee pupils, considering foreign languages as a barrier to learning and thus do not make a creative usage of the cultural and linguistic experience of their foreign pupils. Of course, this problem of communication lies mainly in the lack of interpreters for languages not spoken in Greece (e.g., Pashto, Urdu, Somali or Arabic). They also often appear as advocates of the predominant ethnocentric migrant attitude, as they consider that the assimilation policy by abandoning the mother tongue of immigrant pupils is a natural process towards their social integration (Foskolou & Kyrimi, 2016, 80).

In this respect, there are very few schools, besides intercultural ones, that dare to organize counseling and support meetings for immigrant parents, usually with a voluntary offer of female and male teachers, beyond regular school hours that better serve the parents. In such a case, the teachers are not required to provide full counseling services, since they are neither experts nor trained to do so, but they are limited to encourage and support parents for the best possible management and a smooth outcome of issues related to the school life of their children, as well as restoring a more effective communication with the school community and their active inclusion to it. However, a significant number of teachers are calling for better and more in-depth information on both general and intercultural counseling in particular, as well as a clear reference to the relevant skills required for this purpose.

## 2. Counseling

Counseling is a method of approaching and intervening assistance, an organized process, during which the counselor helps anyone who is involved in it to understand and clarify his/her own views. During the interaction process, the counselor attempts to achieve goals, face problems and develop skills. There are many kinds of counseling, such as psychosocial, legal, gender, vocational counseling, etc., while vocational and intercultural counseling is being developed in a school context, particularly of secondary education. More specifically, when it comes to professional rehabilitation and career, for example, it is referred to as “vocational counseling” or “vocational/career guidance”. Several techniques are being developed to address the obstacles of pursuing career goals and take advantage of forms of intervention that lead to the understanding of professional values, so that each individual proceeds freely and effortlessly to prudent and effective educational experience choices and professional directions (Dimitropoulos, 1985; Tzellos, 1986) and in the future to feel satisfaction in his working environment. The main purpose of Counseling and Vocational Guidance (henceforth: CVG) is to help young people and adults to actively address the variety of problems associated with either their educational path or their professional career. In this respect, CVG works mediately between the individual and the society, the educational and professional opportunities that the latter provides, between individual ambitions and reality. Therefore, CVG is inextricably linked to the changing economic, social, cultural and political conditions, under which it is shaped and implemented Krivas, 2002; Watts & Sultana, 2003).

### 3. Counseling Skills

Within the previous framework, the counselor is guiding, helps the consulted to explore possible solutions and decisions and also helps him/her to be active, since the final decision is always taken by the consulted. Generally speaking, a counselor is the expert who, under certain conditions, investigates along with a person (or perhaps more than one) issues and problems that concern the individual (or individuals) and facilitates their solution (Dimitropoulos, 1994). Under no circumstances will the counselor make specific decisions on behalf of the consulted. During the counseling process, the individuals communicate gradually, forming a relationship of trust, which facilitates the change in their personality structure and behavior and achieves the individual's personal development. The counselor must take into account all aspects of the consulted personality, be enthusiastic, warm, interested, authentic, creative, critical, thoughtful, rational, spiritually open, tolerant to difficulties, with unconditional respect for the consulted, understanding of his/her thoughts and feelings, affectionate for the fellow human-being with dignity, having a sense of humor and exert "active listening" in order to understand the exact message of the consulted.

In addition to the afore-mentioned skills, the knowledge of theories and techniques used by Counseling Psychology, Professional Development Theories and Decision Models are considered to be necessary. It is also necessary for the counselor to use and interpret reliable and scientifically sound psychometric tools (Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou et al., 2008) and to formulate specific, open and clarifying questions (Kosmidou-Hardy & Galanoudaki-Rapti, 1996). The entire "counseling skills model" is initially based on the corresponding code of ethics and then on relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes. Specifically, the required "core skills" include: professional behavior,

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interpersonal skills, professional development skills, needs assessment and referral ability. Finally, the expertise subjects include: evaluation ability, learning facilitation, career counseling, information management, professional development and community co-operation. These skills nowadays often need to be exerted in an intercultural context, since Europe (in particular) is a destination of a rather massive migration, both internal (from one European country to another) and external (from other continents). Especially Greece is receiving directly the largest number of refugees, among the European countries, due to its proximity to Middle East as the Southeastern “Gate” of European Union (Foskolou & Kyrimi, 2016, 23). This phenomenon causes extra considerations on behalf of the European counseling agencies and experts, as they will be commented in the next section.

#### **4. Intercultural Education and Counseling Skills**

In intercultural counseling, the counselor and the consulted come from different cultural contexts and have different perceptions (Das, 1995). However, counseling can help them to deal with social exclusion. The needs of minority populations and vulnerable social groups, in general, are particularly high in terms of professional development, as they need the appropriate knowledge to lead their members in the search for educational opportunities, opportunities for social participation, vocational rehabilitation, but also clarification of professional goals (Dellasudas, 1992). It is noted that culturally diverse consulted persons are confronted with the same main problems they the rest of the people are called upon to resolve, by seeking self-knowledge, information and are also called upon to make decisions. They want to support their entry into the labor market, to ensure the best possible development and exploitation of their own self (Dimitropoulos, 1999).



As a result, a counseling process that consciously or unconsciously ignores multi-nationality and multiculturalism is de facto unable to include in its theory, its assumptions and methods the cultural context of the members of the ethno-cultural groups and to contribute to the equal treatment of the cultures that they represent (Papachristos, 2007). Such counseling does not have intercultural orientations; it aims at pursuing a so-called “monolithic identity” that moves on the logic of assimilation. If we want to emphasize an intercultural counseling, this cannot be done through cognitive domains or through “dry” lessons or methods, in the case of education. Individuals involved in intercultural counseling will be more effective in their work when they have cultivated the lasting possibility of exonerating themselves from stereotypes and prejudices (Papachristos, 2007).

In this case, the counselor is required to have the features that will enable him to work fruitfully and creatively with people of diverse national, cultural and religious backgrounds. The basic prerequisite for the successful performance of the tasks is an “intercultural awareness”, since the counselor comes into systematic contact with the “different”. The adoption of a sensitive cultural approach-empathy, which acts as a catalyst tool in accepting the consulted regardless of his/her diversity, contributes to the achievement of effective communication –therapeutic cooperation, which in turn contributes to the effectiveness of the counseling work. In particular, the effectiveness of a counselor on intercultural counseling is based on the following axes, according to Mastoraki (2003) and Kosmidou-Hardy (1999):

- Intercultural awareness, meaning that he/she has its own cultural background, but that it also has the necessary cultural awareness and sensitivity to accept the cultural differences between the counselor and the consulted, realizing that no theory is politically and morally neutral.

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- Intercultural skills that enable him/her to accept and respect the culture of the consulted, not to have stereotypes, to seek equal opportunities and to support the consulted persons in their everyday life against discrimination, hostility and exploitation by the overwhelming majority.
- Intercultural knowledge and information, namely, to be culturally informed and aware of his/her own cultural behavior, so as to operate with ease in the existing differences, to have cultural respect and to accept education that does not support ethnocentric ways of thinking and doing, that is, education aimed at cultural internationalism.

It is important for the effectiveness of counselors and psychotherapists (Kleftaras, 2003):

- to become aware of themselves and to broaden their cultural identity with regard to the cultural issues faced by the users of their services;
- to investigate the level of cultural identity of the user of their services, belonging to a cultural or ethnic minority, so as to initially adapt their intervention style to the user's level and then to help him/her developing it.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be stressed that a counselor must find a way to overcome any inhibitory obstacle, such as language, which makes the communication with the consulted person(s) difficult. Yet, the most important thing that needs to be understood is that counseling cannot be practiced in a mono-cultural direction, as it was the case until recently, but has to turn to

methods of multicultural thinking and action, which makes it more urgent today due to the social mobility and the refugees' crisis (Papachristos, 2007).

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