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Ethnicity and clinical psychology: A content analysis of the literature

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Abstract

As the demographics of the U.S. population continues to change and become increasingly diverse, clinical psychologists will need to demonstrate their competence in providing culturally appropriate treatments to a wide variety of populations. This article summarizes a comprehensive content analysis of five of the leading scholarly journals in clinical psychology over a 17-year period (1980–1997). Results indicate that only 29.3% of the published articles in the clinical psychology literature included ethnic minority participants. Furthermore, only 5.4% of the articles actually focused specifically on ethnic minority populations. Thus, the clinical psychology literature does not contain adequate coverage of ethnically diverse populations in the U.S., despite their growing numbers. This content analysis provides the field with a baseline for future comparison to determine whether the field in general is responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse society, and to help gauge whether clinical psychologists have the scholarly resources available to assist them with becoming more culturally competent. Implications for the paucity of research and recommendations to ameliorate the problem are discussed. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

According to the 2000 Census, among individuals who reported one race,³ approximately 25% of the population of the United States was comprised of racial minority individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). An additional 2.4% reported being of two or more races (as defined by the Census Bureau). However, these figures are an underestimate of the proportion of U.S. ethnic minorities, as 48% of Latino/Hispanic individuals described themselves as white, and those individuals comprised 11.8% of the total U.S. population. In addition, the census category of “White” included individuals whose ethnic origin were in the Middle East and North Africa—many individuals who are considered to be and often treated as ethnic minorities in U.S., either by themselves or by individuals of European ethnic heritage. Thus, including Latinos, the population of ethnic minorities in the U.S. is closer to 39% and, if individuals with Middle Eastern and Northern African heritage are included, ethnic minority individuals comprise greater than 40% of the U.S. population.

As the U.S. continues to become more ethnically diverse, clinical psychologists have a responsibility to become culturally competent so that they will provide culturally appropriate treatment to their increasingly diverse clients. It would be an egregious error to assume that all clinical psychologists have preexisting knowledge of the effects of ethnicity on mental health, how ethnicity affects the help-seeking, assessment and treatment process, or about the diverse histories and heterogeneity of various ethnic minorities in the U.S. Indeed, the U.S. Surgeon General noted in his recent publication, *Mental health: culture, race and ethnicity: a supplement to mental health: a report of the Surgeon General* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001), the deleterious consequences of the lack of adequate and appropriate mental health care for people of color in the U.S. clinical psychologists were sought as resources for this report, as several well-known ethnic minority clinical psychologists served as science editors. Thus, indicating clinical psychology’s stature in the field of mental health. Further, clinical psychologists have also written about the importance of examining issues of ethnic diversity (Homma-True, Greene, Lopez, & Trimble, 1993).

In order for clinical psychologists to become culturally competent and maintain their competence, state of the art research addressing the impact of culture on mental health issues and psychological treatment of ethnic minorities must be available to them. Ideally, one would hope that development of the clinical psychology research literature focusing on ethnic minorities would reflect changing demographics of our society. Minimally, the content of the clinical psychology literature serves as a barometer of the interest in the mental health of people of color. In some sense, the content of the literature reflects the zeitgeist of clinical psychology.

Over the years, a number of literature reviews examining racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity content of the psychological literature have been published. Ponterotto (1988) reviewed articles published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* between 1976 and 1986, and found that 5.7% of the articles contained ethnic minority participants. Graham’s (1992) 20-year (1970–1989) review of six American Psychological Association (APA) journals,

³ The U.S. Census Bureau does not use the term ethnicity. The closest category used is “race.” Thus, the use of the term “race” here.

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