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Providing Effective Feedback in Social and Cultural Diversity Courses

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Abstract

Cultural competence development, values imposition, respect for diversity, discrimination and multiple related issues have been increasingly pressed to the forefront of discourse in the counseling field and society at large. As social, legislative and academic agendas related to diversity, value-conflicts, religious freedom, discrimination, and protection of rights continue to develop, counselor educators must assume the task of guiding counselors-in-training in making sense of and engaging the discourse as part of their cultural competence development. This article discusses the development of intentional plans for providing feedback in social and cultural diversity courses as an effective pedagogical approach for increasing cultural competence development for counselors-in-training. Through personal anecdotes and experiences in the classroom and professional field, the case for using a multi-dimensional model for guiding the definition of cultural competence will be discussed. Two primary discussions focus on the role of feedback as a pedagogical tool in diversity courses, and strategies for effectively utilizing feedback in the inherently highly-charged learning environments where diversity discussions occur.

Keywords: cultural competence, diversity, values in counseling, ethics, CACREP

Discourse surrounding cultural competence development, values imposition, discrimination, and respect for diversity has been increasingly pressed to the forefront in the counseling field and society at large (American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia, 2011; Family Policy Institute of Washington, 2016; Kaplan, 2014; LegiScan, 2017, Sells & Hagedorn, 2016; Smith & Atieno Okech, 2016, Smith & Atieno Okech, 2016a; Tennessee General Assembly, 2016; TrackBill, 2016). Its importance is defined and

addressed in many forums within the counseling profession. The American Counseling Association (ACA) sought to clarify its position on the look and feel of culturally competent practice through the 2014 iteration of the *ACA Code of Ethics* (Kaplan & Martz, 2014). This code states that counselors should:

> refrain from referring prospective and current clients based solely on the counselor's personally held values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Counselors respect the diversity of clients and seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor's values are inconsistent with the client's goals or are discriminatory in nature. (ACA, 2014, Section A.11.b).

I recall my first in-depth discussion on changes to, and the implications of, the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* during a one-day ethics training with David Kaplan, past president of ACA and its current Chief Professional Officer. This training was then followed by the subsequent conversations that took place in the ethics workshops I provided for clinicians in Georgia. There were many who struggled with the implications for varying reasons, including, but not limited to, the scope of practice and reverse discrimination concerns. For example, in May 2016, within the two years following my initial training, Tennessee Senate Bill 1556/House Bill 1840 was enacted, declaring that no person providing counseling or therapy services will be required to counsel or serve a client as to goals, outcomes, or behaviors that conflict with the sincerely held principles of the counselor or therapist. This has sparked significant tension between the LGBT community, some more conservative evangelical Christian counselors, and the counseling profession as governed by the *ACA Code of Ethics*.

In response to this conscience clause legislation, the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD; 2016) and the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC; 2016) both published statements standing against values discrimination in counseling, standing in support of "assisting counselors in honoring diverse perspectives while remaining true to their own values" (ASERVIC, 2016). Discussions around all of these occurrences and their implications have remained at highly intense levels in continuing education workshops I have conducted, including at the most recent cultural diversity ethics trainings I provided both locally in Atlanta, Georgia, and for a state-level counseling association.

As legislative agendas related to diversity, value-conflicts, religious freedom, discrimination, and protection of rights continue to develop, how can counselor educators help counselors-in-training dissect and engage the discourse as part of their cultural competence development? How can we press counseling students towards the level of increased self and others awareness needed to effectively make client-centered decisions? Against such a tumultuous political and legislative landscape, it is arguable that one of the most common threads in any discussion in the field might best focus on the innovation and application of pedagogical approaches. These types of approaches help students unpack the issues and are effective for furthering the cultural competence development of today's counselors-in-training.

Cultural Competence Defined

Before continuing, further definition of cultural competence would be beneficial for this discussion. Sue and Sue (2013) discussed the 3-stage developmental model for

promoting cultural competence, which involves development of awareness, knowledge, and skill. Awareness addresses:

- Identification of assumptions about self, ascribed racial and/or cultural identity.
- Assumptions about the racial identities and cultures of diverse individuals.
- How one's assumptions impact self and others.
- How one's assumptions impact awareness of socio-political dynamics influencing culturally diverse individuals (with respect to religion, sexual orientation, disability, age, gender, indigenous heritage, national origin, ethnicity).

Knowledge addresses:

- The understanding of what is and is not factual regarding any culturally diverse group.
- The understanding of the inherent bias of Western culture theories and interventions against minority groups.
- The understanding of interpersonal, socio-political, family, and other related dynamics.
- How much this understanding leads one to ask the difficult and relevant questions toward obtaining more informed answers.
- The extent to which these answers aid in the development of theoretical frameworks and interventions that do in fact meet the needs of culturally diverse individuals.

Skill addresses:

- The culturally sensitive and effective implementation of assessments and interventions with minority populations.

- The identification of the comparative effectiveness of evidence-based treatments (EBTs) and answers to questions such as, "How can EBTs be adjusted to be more effective for diverse populations?"; "How might one show inherent assessments as biased?"; and "How can counselors more effectively identify non-bias tests, and/or incorporate clinical judgment with assessment of data in ways that diminish or eliminate bias-related factors?" (Pedersen, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2013).

Cultural Competence Development in Counselors

Sue's (2001) multidimensional model of cultural competence (MDCC) outlines an even more critical interplay that must be generally understood by clinicians and helping professionals as they look at the development of multicultural competence. Along with awareness, knowledge, and skill, I believe that factors contributing to culturally competent decision making on individual, professional, organizational, and societal levels include an understanding of group-specific worldviews, personal encounters with culturally diverse others across the course of a lifetime, and ongoing awareness and exploration of one's own culturally ascribed racial and cultural identities. Figure 1 is an expanded representation demonstrating this four-dimensional interplay of factors that continually influences counselors' ability to make culturally competent decisions that meet the clinical needs of their clients.

The development of students' cultural competence in professional identity is also furthered by clinical intervention applications based on this interplay. Professional cultural competence development and identity involves answers to questions surrounding the role(s) students must eventually choose to play in addressing cultural bias (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2015; Sue & Torino, 2005). Some of these roles include:

- Specializations in clinical intervention and psycho-educational prevention (*individual level interventions*).
- Ongoing research on the effectiveness of currently used and/or new theoretical approaches and interventions (*professional level interventions*).
- Advocating for improved cultural competence training across multiple fields—counseling, education, etc. (*professional level interventions*).
- Advocating for administrative and organizational change towards increasing diverse others' access to needed services (*organizational level interventions*).
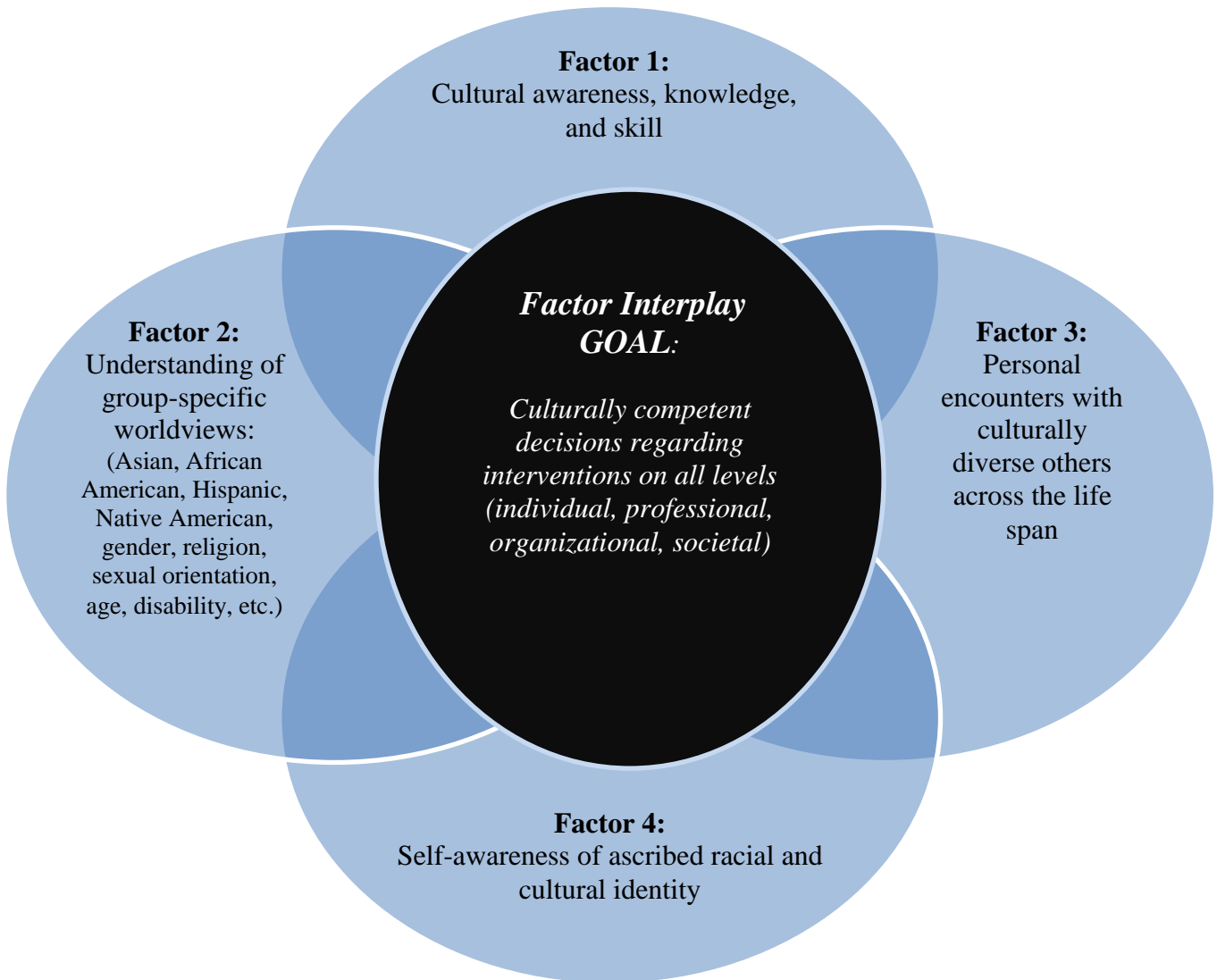- Political organization involvement (*societal level interventions*).

Factor 1:
Cultural awareness, knowledge, and skill

Factor 2:
Understanding of group-specific worldviews:
(Asian, African American, Hispanic, Native American, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc.)

Factor Interplay GOAL:

Culturally competent decisions regarding interventions on all levels (individual, professional, organizational, societal)

Factor 3:
Personal encounters with culturally diverse others across the life span

Factor 4:
Self-awareness of ascribed racial and cultural identity

Figure 1. Sue (2001) Multidimensional Model of Cultural Competence - Expanded Representation.

The Role of Feedback as a Pedagogical Tool

With this framework in mind, McAuliffe and Eriksen (2011) suggested that the goals of intentional pedagogy (which are contended to include effective feedback as a supportive pedagogical vehicle), can involve (but are not limited to) preparing counseling students to:

- Think in complex ways (*critical thinking*).
- Engage with interest and motivation, as well as effort and investment, and operate within cultural relativism, which means having the ability and willingness to decenter from any cultural assumptions regarding age, disability, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, indigenous heritage, national origin, or gender, in order to engage in discourse different from their own.

Through anecdotal assessment in social and cultural diversity courses and ethics courses I have taught, I have observed cultural relativism (in operation rather than as a construct) to be a product of the integration of cultural awareness, knowledge, and skill (Factor 1), understanding of group-specific worldviews (Factor 2), and self-awareness of ascribed racial and cultural identity (Factor 4). Involved in that integration, I have observed that students' willingness and ability to actually engage in the process of learning to operate in cultural relativism, as well as the speed of development along that continuum, seems to run along a kind of awareness, knowledge, and skills continuum (see Figure 2) that is significantly influenced by personal encounters with culturally diverse others across the lifespan (Factor 3).

No Personal Contact	*Some Personal Contact*	*Immersion Type Experiences*
Willing to engage due to shock factor—"I didn't know"; "I feel like I've been in a bubble"; low ability to engage.	*Variable willingness and ability; varying levels of over-confidence because "I have minority friends."*	*Willing and able; open to ongoing learning and growth; no assumptions of expertise.*

Figure 2. Continuum of Awareness, Knowledge & Skill as influenced by Personal Encounters with Culturally Diverse Others Across the Lifespan.

The goal then is to foster the development of cultural relativism by using feedback to help students identify 1) where they are on this continuum, 2) the impact of this positioning on clinical practice, and 3) what their personal convictions press them to consider and do about what they have now identified. This will be a major contributing factor to cultural competence development and eventually to culturally competent clinical practice.

Feedback in the Learning Environment

With the aforementioned goals of instruction in mind, implementation through multiple and different vehicles that are appropriate for traditional and online instruction is always a focus in order to maximize student experiential engagement with the material, each other, and with the instructor. Effective feedback is one such vehicle. Additionally,

from an institutional standpoint, research suggests that teacher-student feedback is a significant influence of student satisfaction and retention (Boettcher, 2008). I have subjectively observed this dynamic within my own classroom experiences. I have also observed it objectively in the role of Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs, tasked with review of grievances surrounding students' perceptions of lack of responsiveness by instructors and the related overall program enrollment outcomes.

To help begin the development of cultural competence, it is critical for instructors to provide feedback early in the semester, answering questions about the course as quickly as possible, as well as responding to initial fears/discomfort/concerns about the material to be covered. Doing so goes a long way in helping students understand: a) the reasons behind why they are being challenged to engage with the subject matter covered in social and cultural diversity courses; b) how this knowledge is relevant in terms of its benefit to them as they move towards operating in their individual fields of expertise; and c) what the risks are of not knowing the information. Effectively dealing with such issues aids in furthering the learner's ability to engage in the self-directed setting of appropriate learning goals (Weimer, 2013).

In any learning environment and for any course topic, timely feedback allows for ongoing interaction with the material and serves to advance the learning process. This is true in traditional learning settings and particularly so in the online environment, where face-to-face contact is not part of the instructional vehicle (Weimer, 2013). The need for feedback is heightened further, however, when maneuvering through the potential minefield inherent in discussions surrounding racial and cultural differences in social diversity courses (Young, 2003). Students value and are encouraged to continue to deepen their engagement when they are given timely feedback on exams, as well as written assignments such as journals, essays, or discussion board postings (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). When students know an instructor's rule of thumb for providing feedback (stated in the syllabus and discussed in the classroom when reviewing assignments due), and see that those rules are honored, they are more likely to experience continued motivation and make efforts for continued and increasing engagement (Shank, 2013).

I have found this is particularly true when journaling is a requirement in diversity courses. These course journals are the primary arena for private reflection, where students sort through their strongest, most conflicting internal reactions—reactions they are afraid to share in class or discussion board conversations—to race and diversity discourse with their peers. As social and cultural diversity course instructors, our timely provision of feedback that is personal and formative for here-and-now learning opens the way to encouraging and allowing students to find their own answers to covert questions such as, "Am I crazy to feel this way?"; "Will I be rejected if I'm honest about how I feel?"; "Is discrimination real in this day and age?"; "How safe am I to be my real self in this course?"; "Am I really racist?"; "Does my friend have bias against people like me and I didn't know it?"; "Do I really discriminate against people of other religions, sexual orientations, cultures…?"; "Am I really part of a broken system?"; "How have my experiences informed how I think?"; "Are things the way I've always thought they were?"; and many others. The role of our feedback is equally important for encouraging students' willingness to decenter from cultural assumptions they may have around age, disability, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, indigenous heritage, national origin, or gender (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Pedersen, 2000). The

development of a willingness to step outside of themselves and to challenge received/conventional forms of knowing is necessary for movement towards self-authored ways of knowing (where they foster a recognition of, and learn to engage in, multiple discourses that inform their thoughts and decisions about self, others, and the social systems that operate in the world; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Use of students' real-world experiences and expertise (particularly with adult learners) related to their current and/or future careers is a perfect vehicle for facilitating such critical development (Shank, 2013).

Structured feedback in the form of responses to journal entries, academic papers, and experiential assignments is the most commonly used approach to providing students with guidance for moving towards cultural self-awareness and competence. For example, a traditional mode of providing feedback to students' journal entries and academic papers involves educators' written responses within those assignments, which only the students themselves can see and hopefully learn from through their subsequent internal processing. An additional and different approach to feedback that I incorporated during a Spring 2016 social and cultural diversity course involved identifying similar threads of thought content found across student journaling as I reviewed them in private, followed by facilitating an open, but anonymous (a critical aspect to be maintained) discussion of those threads of thought. Students were able to hear perspectives on some of the confusing thoughts they frequently experienced about themselves and diverse others in the class but were afraid to discuss openly. From these non-threatening discussions (fostered by the strict anonymity to which I adhered), students normalized and gained both personal and cultural insight regarding their internal experiences and those of their peers. This additional form of anonymously-driven feedback to written work was helpful for students' ongoing processing of some of their most difficult emotional reactions contained in their written assignments.

It is often the case that content from lectures, videos, and class exercises generates intense emotion and must be addressed in the moment, rather than simply allowing students to leave class and process on their own. In-class feedback during tense discussions is key. In such cases, the instructor's role is the facilitation of student exploration of conflicting responses and viewpoints. Arguably more important, however, is the instructor's provision of feedback that serves the dual purpose of promoting student self-awareness while also maintaining the safety of the learning environment. The ease with which dialogue can become toxic when discussing issues related to race, discrimination, or bias can be astonishing and particularly challenging for a faculty member with 35 or more students in one class. Effective and timely feedback during an in-class discussion is a primary vehicle for allowing open discussion on such emotionally charged issues while still providing all students with emotional and psychological protection within that process.

I have found that some of the basic group facilitation skills traditionally taught in master's-level counseling programs are very helpful for achieving this task. My experience is that the development of "group/course" rules that are referenced during discussions and leveraging of Yalom and Lesczc's (2005) here-and-now process, incorporating the immediacy of events occurring in the room rather than past or future focus, has been effective in focusing feedback. Additionally, an ongoing awareness of how the class is functioning as related to the stages of group development has been key in

my own developmental understanding of when to press in, when to pull back, when and how to protect, and when and how much to step out of the mix and allow student engagement without active intervention. More reserved students who shy away from entering the fray have responded to the provision of a student-designed anonymous comments box from which I pull and respond to student generated questions and comments. Finally, student responses have been particularly helpful in showing me the effectiveness of class sessions where I have intentionally focused on creating a self-reflective loop in which students are pressed to engage in self-evaluation (Yalom & Lesczc, 2005).

Conclusion

Providing effective feedback in emotionally charged social and cultural diversity courses can be like walking through a minefield. While you know it will indeed happen, you can't always be sure when it will occur, who will be the first victim(s), and how many will be impacted by the blast in the process. Our job, as instructors, is to contain the blast radius so that students can walk through, and learn about themselves and others, without losing a limb in the process. Students feel most safe to allow honest teacher-student discourse through written and verbal feedback, both individually and to the group as a whole, when educators are genuine, when we demonstrate an effort to know who each student is, and when we intentionally and consciously press ourselves to operate within a frame of non-judgmental and unconditional positive regard. This can be particularly difficult when, at times, our own emotions, both positive and negative, are triggered. So while providing such feedback in social and cultural diversity discussions is certainly not simple in many respects, doing so becomes maintainable when, as educators, we remember that students are engaged in a process of self-authoring, some for the very first time, and with some of the most controversial topics within our society today. This understanding as a primary consideration can be a strong motivator and guide for educators when developing effective feedback that fosters, rather than closes off, ongoing student exploration, engagement, and growth.

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