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Article 71

Immersion Into Faith and Culture: A Means of Developing Multicultural Counseling

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Competencies

The rapid diversification of American society over the past two decades has encouraged the counseling profession to recognize and address diversity in both its practice and its training of counselors (D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991; Heppner & O'Brien, 1994). Yet, this demographic transformation appears to continue to pose a challenge for counselor educators and their trainees (D'Andrea et al., 1991). A study by Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999) indicated that counselors tend to view their training in multicultural competence as inadequate. Moreover, counselor educators, though receptive and eager to meet these challenges, are having a difficult time figuring out how to develop comprehensive multicultural counseling competence (MCC) in their trainees (Alexander, Krucek, & Ponterotto, 2005).

The importance of this issue to the counseling profession has been affirmed by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) and the American Counseling Association (ACA), as both organizations have implemented multicultural standards that counseling training programs and counselors are required to adhere to (Dinsmore & England, 1996; Estrada, Durlak, & Juarez, 2002).

Moreover, in response to the inclusion of spiritual and religious beliefs in counseling, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), a division of ACA, developed Competencies for Integrating Spirituality into Counseling as a guide for the counseling profession (ASERVIC, n.d.). The Spiritual Competencies inform counselors of the prerequisites to effectively and ethically include spirituality and religion in counseling and how to meet the ethical mandates for competency in this area (Robertson, 2008). Consequently, course content should consist of culturally-responsive materials that develop and foster multicultural competencies across the domains of awareness, knowledge, and skills (Collins & Pieterse, 2007). Although these standards have been enacted, the literature has suggested that educators are still having a difficult time coming up with techniques that can provide trainees with the competencies needed in multiculturalism (Alexander et al., 2005; Dinsmore & England, 1996). Although 90% of counselor education programs address multiculturalism in their course work, the level of training received is not significant enough to address the rapidly growing needs of diversity (Das, 1995). For instance, although the multicultural counseling competencies have been expanded to include other areas of diversity such as sexual orientation and spiritual and religious beliefs, it appears the primary focus of these guidelines continues to center around racial and ethnic issues (Constantine & Ladany, 2000). Subsequently, the influence of a client's faith or spirituality is typically left unaddressed or, at best, receives only superficial attention during the intake process through a perfunctory inquiry into the client's religious denominational preferences (Robertson, 2008). Neglecting this sphere of influence can pose a problem, as faith and spiritual beliefs are pervasive; "they influence one's worldview and are imbedded in most of life's experiences" (Robertson, 2008, p. 27). According to Everts & Agee (1994), people typically use spiritual strategies to manage all of life's events. This further illuminates the necessity for counselor education programs to provide trainees with a viable strategy for developing multicultural competence to address the growing needs of a diverse society.

A possible explanation for this gap between training and need may have to do with the way students retain information. The literature suggests that students in general tend to learn more through experiential learning as opposed to simple didactic and information-based learning (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). This suggests that counseling programs seeking to infuse multicultural competence in students may need to combine instructive learning with practical experiential learning experiences (Alexander et al., 2005).

The purpose of this article is to provide counselor educators with a multicultural course technique that integrates an experiential activity designed to infuse issues related to faith, spirituality and religion into counselor education; thus, facilitating the development of professional counseling students' multicultural competencies. The experiential activity engages students through direct immersion, interaction, observation and reflection. Such practical activities seem to be missing from some reports on different approaches to multicultural counseling training and professional development (D' Andrea et al., 1991; Hill, 2003) although descriptions of differing types of immersions have increased (Pedersen, 2000; Roysircar, Hubbell, & Gard, 2003). The framework provided here is unique and can be used to safely challenge counseling students while concurrently providing them with an understanding of real issues and trends existing within a multicultural and diverse society. The hope is that the challenges that counseling students

face throughout this experience will continue to raise their level of self-awareness in relation to multiculturalism and facilitate their movement towards competence in this area (Hill, 2003).

Experiential Activity

Integration of this innovative method is appropriate for courses at both the masters and doctoral levels. Multicultural courses often provide understanding of the cultural context of relationships, issues, and trends in a multicultural and diverse society. Factors typically explored in such courses are culture, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental and physical characteristics, education, family values, religious and spiritual values, socioeconomic status, and unique characteristics of individuals, couples, families, ethnic groups, and communities. Objectives of learning include gaining new insight into socially-disruptive phenomena such as racism, discrimination, and prejudice; increasing awareness and effective management of preconceived biases; and the role of the counselor as a change agent who can redress imbalances through counseling practice, research and resource allocations (CACREP, 2009, section II.C).

The core experiential activity described herein is an immersion experience designed to help students learn and demonstrate an understanding of the diverse role of religion, faith beliefs or spirituality in individuals' lives. This activity proposes to meet the educational objective as set forth by ASERVIC's second spiritual competency: "To recognize that the client's beliefs (or absence of beliefs) about spirituality and/or religion are central to his or her worldview and can influence psychosocial functioning" (ASERVIC, n.d.). This is accomplished by three things: (1) Proposing, participating in, and evaluating a religious, faith or spiritual experience that is different from the students' experiences; (2) Assessing and processing of feelings, thoughts, and reactions to the immersion experience. By engaging in this self-exploration, counselor trainees begin to explore internal motivations and potential biases toward diverse spiritual and/or religious beliefs and practices while attempting to develop a process of finding and understanding their own religious/spiritual identity as described in ASERVIC's third spiritual competency (ASERVIC, n.d.); and (3) Appraisal of current literature related to the engagement of religion, faith, or spirituality in the counseling process. Additionally, the immersion experience must include at least one, but preferably two, additional components of diversity involving culture, ethnicity, or gender orientation. As a result of engaging in this immersion experience, counselor trainees will gain a better understanding of the role faith, religion, and spirituality can play in various cultures and how they may impact cultural development and personal cultural identification, thus increasing their understanding of the potential interrelations between culture, religion, and spirituality (Fukuyama, Siahpoush, & Sevig, 2005).

Proposal

Students were required to develop a brief written proposal describing the group of individuals they wish to interact with and how this immersion experience will be significantly different from any they have had previously. The first student proposal is viewed as the starting point for discussion with the professor. This dialogue refines and clarifies the uniqueness of the immersion experience for the student, often resulting in

further student exploration and a change in direction before approval to engage in the activity. In addition, students were required to write a research paper describing their group, and deliver a summary presentation of their research to the class prior to engaging in the immersion experience. This requirement forces students to research and explore the diversity that exists within their own general geographic location and to develop a viable plan to engage that population. However, limited diversity within a given community may require some students to use a unique and experientially different feature or aspect of their own faith, religion, or spirituality as opposed to an entirely different one.

Participation

All faith experiences have to be significantly different in at least two components, such as ethnicity and worship style. Ideally, immersion experiences would include attending a communal faith, religious, or spiritual celebration, festival, worship, or prayer service. An example would be a Caucasian Christian female going to a Mosque for a prayer service or to a Hindu festival. A within faith example would be a Christian attending a mass at a Greek Orthodox parish, if their faith experiences only consisted of charismatic African-American worship celebrations. Gender orientation and faith expression is another example of a diverse faith experience in which students could participate, such as an Atheist student with a heterosexual orientation attending a Universalist church where the majority of the congregation has a different sexual orientation.

Examples of several settings in which students immersed themselves included a Greek Orthodox Church service, a prayer service at an Islamic Mosque, a Baha'i worship service, a reading of the Torah at a conservative Jewish temple, a meditation session at a Buddhist retreat center, a Native American Spring Corn Festival, rites of passage, and a service at a Hindu cultural center. Students were encouraged to not only immerse themselves in the faith experience but to also engage individuals within the immersion group by conducting individual interviews. Students often shared meals with people from their setting and had in-depth discussions with them. These personal interactions provided an opportunity for the students to explore and process what they had observed with the people who lived the faith and culture. Their immersion into different faiths and cultures at both the corporate and personal level often produced a synthesis of learning as students began to understand and appreciate both the differences and the similarities of others.

Student Evaluation

Descriptive qualitative data were collected over a period of two years from doctoral level students who completed this activity as a part of their advanced coursework in multicultural counseling. The sample ($N = 28$) consisted of 18 female and 10 male students residing in urban, suburban, and rural settings. Students reported their ethnicity as Caucasian ($n = 21$), African American ($n = 6$), and Hispanic ($n = 1$). Students provided evaluative feedback on their immersion experiences through four narrative sources which included process papers, summary presentations, discussion boards, and final course evaluations. Edited summaries of major themes from each source are

provided below using the students' own words for further validation of the findings by the reader (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2007). Several students reviewed the final themes to clarify and verify that they were accurately represented. The qualitative results presented below are, therefore, supported by triangulation, member checking, and the consensus of the authors (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Student Reflections

Students completed reflective papers that described their experiences and processing of the immersion experience and interviews. Upon reflection of their experiences, students indicated that when they first considered the immersion experience they had feelings of "apprehension" and "discomfort." For some, these fears were affirmed during their immersion experience as they experienced "exclusion," "loneliness," and feeling like a "minority who wanted to belong." They expressed "sadness," "confusion," and a sense of being "overwhelmed by the experience." For others, the engagement resulted in feeling "welcomed," "included," and "accepted." These students experienced feeling "enriched," "moved," and "surprised." When reflecting upon the overall experience, students reported increased self-awareness of "biases, assumptions," and their "inaccurate presuppositions," along with gaining an appreciation for the uniqueness of individuals and their values. Many students expressed that the immersion allowed them to experience, in a small way, the "other's perspective." Expressions such as experiencing a change in their "tolerance of others' differences" and a desire to be "more inclusive," were also reported.

Application

In addition to the reflective and evaluative components, students also produced summary presentations that reviewed their pre-immersion research on their cultural group, a description of their unique immersion experiences, and application of their learning to the counseling setting. Generally, students indicated the "experience far exceeded expectations." Although students initially reported feelings of "nervousness" and being "uncomfortable with being a minority," these experiences often facilitated a "renewed empathy for clients engaging in counseling." For example, students transferred this learning to their clients by expressing a desire to have their clients "feel safe" and to have their "cultural identity understood," "values acknowledged," and "privacy and religion respected." As the students immersed themselves in a differing faith and culture, they indicated a "new respect and appreciation" for others who, at first, appeared "so dissimilar" to themselves and a desire to "stay in touch" and "build bridges" with those they met.

Online discussion boards were also used by students to process their experiences, respond to questions from their peers, and identify appropriate skills to use in counseling clients from their immersion population. Students described initially feeling "strange," "nervous," "ignored," "misunderstood," and "like invading someone's family reunion," but interestingly, overall they indicated that the experiences were "pleasant and insightful." Many reported a "heightened sense of awareness during the service" as they tried to observe and understand what was going on. Others indicated that they were "emotionally disturbed" during the experiences and needed time to process before interacting with the individuals. Most reported "gratitude for interactions," and "a new

respect for others who are different from ourselves,” while still seeking to “correct misconceptions about others.” Students also discussed appropriate multicultural counseling interventions and strategies to use with their immersion population, but they often reported that religious or faith sensitive counseling strategies were limited in number and not extensively researched in the literature.

The final course evaluations gave students the opportunity to indicate which one element of the course they would want to keep or remove. The unanimous response was to keep the experiential immersion activities. One student said, “The multicultural experience was priceless. I began to view people in a different way rather than just expect that they have the same beliefs/values as I do.” Another stated, “Keep the cultural and religious experiences, as it extends us beyond our comfort zone,” and yet another indicated that, “I would definitely keep the experiential activities in the course.” In addition, students said that “The most significant learning experience had to be the immersion experience.” “The cultural faith activity is a wonderful real world learning experience. It was great. No disappointments.” Other students identified specifics such as, “Participating in a multicultural experience different than what I am used to or have done in the past,” and “Having the opportunity to talk to other students about their multicultural experiences.” It is apparent that the immersion into faith and culture, and the subsequent discussions, had a significant impact upon these students.

Summary and Concluding Discussion

As outlined previously, the students’ narratives indicate development of multicultural counseling competencies across the three domains of awareness, knowledge, and skills (Collins & Pieterse, 2007). Students also experienced an increased awareness of their attitudes and beliefs towards racially and ethnically different clients. Development of their multicultural perspective in order to provide effective service to clients was also noted (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Worthington, Soth-McNett, & Moreno, 2007). In addition, students describe an increased understanding of their own worldview and of the varying cultural worldviews of others (Sue et al., 1992; Worthington et al., 2007). Finally, the students discussed application of their new knowledge with clients by identifying and discussing implementation of culturally-appropriate counseling strategies (Sue et al., 1992; Worthington et al., 2007).

Implications

The responses of the students seem to support the use of this type of faith and cultural immersion experience in counselor training and development of multicultural competencies. The students’ responses to the immersion activity not only indicate that real world experiences do impact students, but it also suggests that such activities may be a helpful addition to traditional classroom activities (Sue et al., 1992). This type of immersion activity may help students gain clarity regarding the perspectives of others and, with application, learn to empathize more deeply with their clients’ experiences (Alexander et al., 2005). Consistent with previous research, Collins and Pieterse (2007) found that this activity also appears to foster learning and development of effective coping mechanisms in dealing with diverse individuals.

One challenge in using this type of activity, however, is in preparing and processing with students the potential emotive responses that may arise in such situations (Collins & Pieterse, 2007). Many students identified emotive responses before, during and after the immersion experiences. Students had to address and effectively manage these responses during the immersion experience with their group and with their peers. These skills and attitudes must be worked on with the students prior to, during and after the immersion experiences, and care must be taken to help them apply their learning to their work with counseling clients (Collins & Pieterse, 2007).

The review of student narratives provides some direction for systematic research into the impact of immersions into culture and faith. Future research should include quantitative assessment of student's multicultural competencies (MCC) prior to and after the immersion, and before and after processing with peers through in-class discussions and discussion boards. This would provide insight into how much change is produced by each specific activity and whether the change happens all at once or over time. Comparative control group designs that assess MCC development of students who engage in this activity compared to those who do not, as well as with those who experience a different type of immersion, such as going overseas, may be warranted.

Additionally, future research could assess which factors of MCC (i.e., knowledge, skills, or awareness) are impacted more by this type of activity. Since many of the students' narratives indicated emotional discomfort and relief related to the activity, it may prove helpful to explore what specific components or activities assist students to process the emotional content of the immersion experience and if the level of an individual's emotional response correlates to greater change in MCC. Future studies should include a longitudinal component that examines how MCC development changes over time, both through courses and through specific activities.

Recommendations for Counselor Training

Counselor educators have been given the privilege of facilitating and fostering the growth of multicultural competencies within their students so that they may provide competent counseling to increasingly diverse individuals and their families. Assignments and activities must engage students in "real world" learning that encourages them to draw on higher order thinking skills and create solutions (Alexander et al., 2005; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). Student immersions into differing faiths and cultures are accessible in most communities and could be easily implemented by counseling programs without additional costs or extensive planning. The advantage of this type of activity is that the students immerse and engage with individuals from within their own community, yet with whom they had no prior experience, resulting in learning that may be more readily transferrable to their counseling settings when they encounter clients or students different from themselves. Moreover, it can foster a spirit of social action as students develop empathy for their clients that is grounded in shared experience and a new perspective (CACREP, 2009, section IV.I.1-5).

This activity could be enhanced in a number of ways. First, the immersion could be more complete by requiring the student to engage in the setting over longer periods of time, thus producing a fuller understanding of the other (Gerstein, Rountree, & Ordóñez, 2007). This lengthened immersion might include living with a family or individual for a week, or participating with them one day a week for the length of the entire course.

Second, the immersion experience could be enhanced by requiring the student to include a social action component whereby they identify needs within the chosen population and design an intervention to address those needs. Third, the immersion experience could also be enhanced by expanding the skill building of students by including specific supervision related to processing students' learning and integrating the experience into their counseling sessions (Russell, 2005). This would allow the student to further expand and develop their self-reflective counseling practice.

This activity may hold promise for counselor educators seeking to challenge and enrich their students' lives related to their multicultural competency. This activity has proven beneficial to the students involved, and it is hoped that this report will create momentum for further exploration of experiential methods to develop and enhance the multicultural competencies of counselors, as counselors' multicultural competencies are crucial to ensuring the ethical and holistic care that individuals need today and will increasingly need in the future.

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