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Introducing Multicultural Competency Development in Counselor Education Screening

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Abstract

As gatekeepers to the profession, counselor educators maintain a responsibility of selecting and training future counselors who possess skills necessary to becoming effective counselors. Typical methods of screening may not reveal personal qualities such as interpersonal style, attitude, self-awareness, and disposition. This paper provides a description of an innovative screening procedure that integrates an introduction of multicultural awareness and competence to assess personal qualities of candidates. Emergent themes from student feedback included reflections on feelings and reflections on process, and implications for counselor educators are given.

Counselor educators have the distinct role of acting as gatekeepers to the profession of counseling. Selecting and training future counselors who are competent, ethical, and possess the skills necessary to become effective counselors is no easy task. The typical methods of selecting quality candidates that graduate programs might use, such as grade point average (GPA), letters of recommendation, GRE scores, and writing samples, (Homeyer, Schmidt, & Walker, 2009; Leverett-Main, 2004), do not reveal the personal qualities that are perhaps most crucial to assess during the selection process – an applicant's interpersonal style, attitude, self-awareness, and disposition. A survey of

counselor education programs nationwide revealed that GPA was the number one preferred method for screening candidates (98.4%) followed by a written statement of purpose (76.3%; Perusse, Goodnough, & Noel, 2001).

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) suggested that selection methods should include an assessment of candidates' potential for forming effective interpersonal relationships in individual and group contexts, openness to self-examination, and personal and professional self-development. Counselor educators should also assess nonacademic characteristics or behaviors that could interfere with candidates effectively working with clients (Duba, Kindsvatter, & Paes, 2010). Counselors should possess empathy, unconditional positive regard, congruence, and hold a degree of self-awareness – a willingness to accept and address personal weaknesses and strengths (Smaby, Maddux, Richmond, Lepkowski, & Packman, 2005).

Multiculturalism is now an integrated concept within the counseling profession (Boysen, 2010). In a time that demands counselors to be culturally competent, it is imperative that novices to the counseling profession be prepared to engage in conversations about race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, among many other diverse topics. Addressing these issues, and assessing a candidate's readiness to engage in challenging dialogue about personal biases, primes the prospective student as to what to expect in the classroom. Even more importantly, the ability to self-reflect, address personal areas of intolerance, and work towards multicultural sensitivity in the classroom undoubtedly impacts counselor competency post-degree. The purpose of this paper is to explore how addressing social justice issues from the very first encounter with prospective students through the screening process not only contributes to the selection of high-quality future counselors, but prepares students to engage in exploring explicit and implicit personal biases both within the context of training, and eventually within the practice of professional counseling.

Multicultural Competency and Social Justice in Counselor Education

Pack-Brown, Seymour, and Thomas (2008) proposed that one of the biggest challenges novice counselors experience is acknowledging that they bring personal prejudices, cultural biases, and stereotypes to their work with clients. It is crucial that counselor educators assist students in becoming more aware of their personal prejudices, cultural biases, and stereotypes. The counseling profession has experienced a paradigm shift in the last few decades, calling for an integration of advocacy and social justice into the preparation of novice counselors (Stone & Hanson, 2002). Counselor education programs are being urged to integrate social justice and advocacy into their programs in an effort to solidify a new vision of counselors as change agents working towards removing barriers for their clients (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010). The counseling profession is shifting from historical perspectives that placed all responsibility for change on the individual, to a model that acknowledges the impact of environmental influences on clients' problems.

"If social justice is to move from the margins to the center of the counseling profession, it must begin with counselor educators" (Ratts & Wood, 2011, p. 208). Multiculturalism and social justice issues are reflected in the professional perspectives of faculty members and faculty members are crucial to the development of students' critical

thinking and ethical decision-making skills (Pack-Brown et al., 2008). Social justice should be considered both a goal and process for counseling professionals. Odegard and Vereen (2010) conducted a qualitative study exploring the experiences and processes of counselor educators integrating social justice into the pedagogy across their training curriculum. They observed that faculty went through a process of developing self-awareness related to social justice that evolved through personal and professional experiences. This process included increasing awareness and motivating factors including personal values, experiences, and emerging emotions. This study highlights the importance of counselor education faculty commitment to social justice and advocacy in their teaching and modeling of neophyte counselors.

Advocacy plays a crucial role in integrating social justice into the counseling profession. Students entering a counseling program may not be prepared for the amount of self-awareness that will be expected of them. Incorporating social justice and advocacy foci into the screening process introduces the prospective student to the expectation of self-awareness that the program embodies.

Common Screening Methods

Incorporating methodology into the screening process that reveals qualities and characteristics that are not well suited to the counseling profession saves both the program and the student the hardship of managing deficiencies later on, and ultimately serves to protect future clients from harm. Past research has identified that nearly 5% of counselors-in-training lack the psychological health and/or competence to work effectively with clients, while 93-95% of faculty have witnessed impaired students in their programs (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). Gaubatz and colleagues (2002) concluded that formalized gatekeeping procedures, which begin with screening of applicants, are essential components of ethically sound professional training.

Many programs interview candidates for admission into counselor education programs and attest to its efficacy in predicting student success (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Nelson et al., 2003). Nagpal and Ritchie (2002) suggested that interviewing candidates for admission into counselor education programs has the potential to assess the following characteristics: professional attributes, personal attributes, and interpersonal skills. One method of assessing professional attributes, personal attributes, and interpersonal skills is by integrating a challenging question that encourages students to self-examine a belief or value, such as a social justice issue, while displaying their interpersonal style of communication

A Social Justice Method of Screening

For several years, the Counselor Education Department at Winona State University (WSU) in southeast Minnesota has been honing its screening process in an attempt to select the most "socially conscious, culturally competent school and community counselors, leaders, and agents of change for effective, respectful, responsible work with people reflecting the broad diversity of society" (WSU Counselor Education Department, 2012, p. 6). Through many revisions and trials of the screening process, including faculty participating in the process to test the experience, faculty have reached a point where they feel they are truly capturing the essence of candidates' capacity to

demonstrate self-awareness, address areas of intolerance, and develop a plan for continued development and growth. Through this process, faculty are not only able to assess areas relevant to the cultural competence of applicants for admission, but they are able to observe candidates interacting in a small group interview with a faculty member as well as behavior interacting in a large group process. Carefully developed questions are meant to evoke a response in candidates that allows faculty to assess their level of self-awareness, ability to tolerate points of view different from their own, demonstrate appropriate boundaries, and demonstrate an understanding of the importance of tolerance in counseling.

The WSU Counselor Education Screening Day is scheduled for a full morning of activities, where applicants rotate in groups of approximately 10 between a small group interview with faculty followed immediately by a large group experience, a writing activity, campus tour, and a question and answer session with current students. The small group interview and large group experience will be explained in detail below and will form the foundation of the social justice focus of the screening process.

Small Group Interview With Faculty

In groups of three or four, applicants to the Counselor Education Department meet privately with faculty for 30 minutes. After a brief introduction to the activity and an explanation that the activity requires a certain amount of risk-taking on the part of the applicants, the following description is read aloud and given to the applicants for their reference throughout the process:

> *Tolerance of diverse others is a critical quality for counselors to possess and demonstrate in their practice as helping professionals. Think about a personal bias, prejudice, or stereotype you have about a specific multicultural group or issue (e.g., LGBTQ issues, religious differences, race and ethnicity issues, homelessness and poverty, etc.).*

During the small group interview experience, each candidate is to respond to all of the following questions:

1. What is your personal bias, stereotype, or prejudice about one particular group or issue? What is its origin? When did you first become aware of it?

2. How, specifically, does your bias, stereotype, or prejudice impact on your thoughts, feelings, and actions when interacting with people who identify with this group or issue?

3. What is it that you believe to be most important for us to know about you in order for us to be well informed about your goodness of fit with our program and our program's goodness of fit with you? (to determine awareness of what our program is about)

During the small group interview, faculty rate the candidates on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 with 1 indicating "very low" and 5 indicating "very high" on the following constructs: openness to discussing self; recognizes personal intolerance areas; tolerant of different point of view; clarity about reasons for entering program; readiness for graduate studies; demonstrates appropriate boundaries; and overall impression of the candidate.

Large Group Experience

Following the small group interview with faculty, the group of approximately 10 applicants reconvenes and are given the following instructions, which also are provided to them for reference during the experience:

> *You have been given written instructions for an activity that the total group will be asked to engage in for the next thirty (30) minutes. The instructions will be read aloud to the group before the activity begins. You may, however, refer to the written instructions at any time during the group experience in order to remind yourself and/or the group of your assignment. During this time, faculty will function only as observers while the group interacts. It is the responsibility of the group to ensure that all group members have an opportunity to speak and share their perspective(s). Faculty will notify the group when five (5) minutes remains in order to give the group time to conclude their discussion.*

> ***Group Activity Instructions:*** Please introduce yourself to the group by stating your first and last name. The group is asked to take a moment for each group member to reflect on the personal biases, stereotypes, or prejudices they identified in the small group experience, and discuss the following question.

> *What, specifically, must you do, or are you doing, to overcome your bias, stereotype, or prejudice in order to demonstrate tolerance for a point of view or perspective that is different from your own?*

During the large group experience, faculty rate the candidates on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 with 1 indicating "very low" and 5 indicating "very high" on the following constructs: engages appropriately in group discussion; self-aware; listens respectfully without interrupting; able to state a plan for addressing intolerance; understands importance of tolerance in counseling; demonstrates appropriate boundaries; tolerant of different point of view; and overall impression of the candidate.

Upon completion of the series of activities candidates are asked to engage in throughout the process, faculty scores are combined and averaged to compile a total score, appropriately weighted, that encompasses the following components: small group interview (30%), large group interview (25%), GPA (20%), writing sample (10%), personal statement (10%), and letters of recommendation (5%).

Student Reflections

Within one semester of having completed screening for admission into the WSU Counselor Education Department in the fall of 2012, 46 admitted students were invited via e-mail by the principal investigator to share their experiences regarding their participation in the small and large group activities of the screening process. Thirty-one students completed the survey using Qualtrics (2013) survey software. The following question was posed: "Please comment on your experience during the WSU Counselor Education screening process of being asked to identify an area of intolerance in a small group of your peers, and then being asked to elaborate on a plan to address the area of intolerance in a larger group." Two themes emerged from student responses – reflections on feelings experienced during the small and large group interview activities, and reflections on the overall process of engaging in the activities.

Reflections on Feelings

Three subthemes were identified in student responses with regards to their reflections on feelings: vulnerable, reflective, and uncomfortable. Students who reported experiencing vulnerability during the small and large group experiences described feeling exposed. One participant stated that the experience "left us feeling exposed, but we were exposed together." Another student reported "the question was thought-provoking and forced one to step outside of his or her comfort zone." Finally, a student reflected "being surrounded by peers really puts you on the spot, but also forced us to bring a good answer to the table."

Students who reported feeling reflective as a result of being asked to identify an area of intolerance in the small group experience and reflect on a plan to address the area of intolerance in the large group experience, reported that they were challenged to examine their belief systems and values in a way they had not been before. One student reported "I consider myself to be very tolerant, but was surprised to realize that I did have an area of intolerance." Another stated that the experience "made me take a look at myself, and think about any bias I may have, or intolerance. When you can identify that in yourself, I believe it makes you a better person so you can work towards addressing that area of your life." Finally, a student reflected "I think it is extremely important for anyone going into this profession to be aware that their own mind has blind spots, and to constantly seek them out and demand more of themselves."

Students who reported feeling uncomfortable as a result of participating in the small and large group experiences identified feeling anxious or surprised by the questions posed. One student reported that he or she felt "slightly uncomfortable to admit a personal area of intolerance, but it was freeing to have an honest and open discussion." Another student said that "the experience was uncomfortable at first; it took some deep self-reflection to answer the question honestly." Another stated "it was uncomfortable and I felt that many people avoided answering the question." Finally, a response that embodied the overall consensus of the students surveyed reported "it was an uncomfortable task to complete when being asked to do so in front of a group of strangers; however, it was a positive way to encourage prospective students to reflect on their biases and step out of their comfort zone."

Reflections on Process

Three subthemes were identified related to students' reflections on the process of identifying an area of personal intolerance in the small group experience, and then identifying a plan to address the area of intolerance in the large group experience – importance of topic, group experience, and time. Students who reflected on the importance of the topic expressed things like "it was a challenging question to think about, but I think the group along with myself took something from it and learned from each other," it "sparked a great discussion," and "this was an eye-opener for me and prepared me for what was to come in the program."

Students who reflected on the group experience shared both positive and negative experiences. On the positive side, one student reported "starting with the small group created an ideal situation to become comfortable with peers. The process was made to be much less intimidating because of the inclusion of the small group." Another student reported "I think thinking on the area of intolerance in the small group was nerve

wracking, but once you got a chance to formulate your opinion and hear what your peers said, it was much easier to hold a discussion in the large group."

Students who reported a negative experience with the group process said things like "I prepared ahead of time assuming I would be asked more than one question and would have more of an opportunity to show my strengths as a potential counselor." Another expressed that he or she would have liked more one-on-one time with faculty.

Students who reflected on the use of time during the small and large group interview processes reported statements like "in the large group, there wasn't enough time to discuss the subject in the detail the subject needed," and "it took a long time to come up with something to talk about." Another student reflected "being asked to think about a personal bias on the spot forced me to pick the one that came to mind first rather than having time to think of something potentially more politically correct."

Implications for Counselor Education

The Counselor Education Department at WSU prides itself on being a department that engenders a social justice and advocacy focus. Engaging students in multicultural competency development from their first encounter with faculty and other prospective students primes them for an educational experience rich in self-reflection of personal areas of intolerance. The screening process helps identify students who might struggle in developing multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skill. The screening process also gives faculty an opportunity to interact and observe candidates as they demonstrate their interpersonal style of communication in a spontaneous and vulnerable encounter. The process is intentionally meant to foster a level of discomfort in candidates in order to capture an unrehearsed response to a provocative question. Candidates' responses give faculty a glimpse of their willingness to become vulnerable, self-disclose appropriately, and engage in self-reflection.

The screening process has undergone several revisions in recent years to reach its current protocol; however, there are still modifications to consider. One recent consideration has been in regards to faculty consistency in rating candidates across constructs. Faculty are currently in the process of further defining the constructs to increase inter-rater reliability. In addition, it may be worth considering how individual items, such as GPA, and the interview components, contribute to the overall score a candidate receives at the end of the screening process. The components of the screening process that evaluate a candidate's potential for multicultural competency and self-awareness are crucial; however, there are additional components, like GPA, that are equally critical to evaluate when determining a candidate's potential for success in a graduate program. Currently, the interview components comprise 55% of the candidate's overall rating, whereas GPA comprises only 20%.

Multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skill are integral components of practicing competently as a counseling professional (Boysen, 2010). The zeitgeist demands counselors to be culturally competent, and it is vital that novices to the counseling profession be prepared to engage in conversations about areas of intolerance. Faculty of counselor education programs have a responsibility to engage students in these important conversations, and the screening process provides an ideal opportunity to initiate the process of multicultural competency awareness and development.

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