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The Voices of Students: Religious and Spiritual Issues in Counselor Education

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Richard C. Henriksen Jr., Jennifer Bornsheuer-Boswell,
and Monica A. Polonyi

Henriksen, Jr., Richard C., is an Associate Professor of Education at Sam Houston State University. His research interests are in the areas of multiple heritage identity development, religious and spiritual issues in counseling, and multicultural counseling.

Bornsheuer-Boswell, Jennifer, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling at the University of Houston – Victoria. Part of this manuscript was completed as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling at Oakland University. Her research is focused on counseling with children and parents, clinical supervision, and religious and spiritual issues in counseling and counselor education.

Polonyi, Monica A., is a Professor in the School of Counseling and Social Service at Walden University. Her research and scholarship focuses on religious and spiritual issues in counseling.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Richard Henriksen Jr., Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling, Sam Houston State University, Box 2119, Huntsville, 77341-2119. E-mail: rch008@shsu.edu

Abstract

Research focused on students' perceptions of their training to incorporate religious and spiritual issues in counseling has provided much information but has not included the training recommendations that come from students. This article discusses the practical applications of teaching counselors-in-training about religious and spiritual issues and presents the value of including religious and spiritual training, a literature review, and specific training recommendations.

The diversity of the United States continues to change, as seen in data from the United States Census Bureau (Kai, 2010). Kai (2010) reported that the country now has more people from a wider variety of backgrounds, including those with a broader spectrum of religious and spiritual beliefs. Because of the ever-growing diversity, we also see the changes in the religious practices and beliefs held by the many members of our

communities (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2013). The growing diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs held by members of society has also begun to impact the religious and spiritual beliefs held by students in counselor education programs. According to the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC; 2009), counselors need to be able to competently address the spiritual and religious needs of their clients. Additionally, the ethical codes of our profession also address the need for counselors to attend to the spiritual and religious needs of our clients and focus on training needs so that future and present counselors can engage in ethical and appropriate practice.

There are various codes in the counseling field that lend guidance to methods of practice, ethics, and supervision and training of counselors and counselor educators. These include the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2005), the ethical guidelines for the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES; 1993), the religious and spiritual competencies described by ASERVIC (2009), and the standards for counselor education program accreditation developed by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009). All of these codes and standards guide counselors, counselor educators, and supervisors to teach and practice appropriate counseling skills and methods in order to strengthen the profession as a whole. Some of these codes and standards address the use of religion and spirituality in counseling specifically, while others describe counselors' ability to incorporate a vast array of methods for working with diverse populations and issues.

ACES, a division of ACA, was created to guide and support the academic advancement of supervising counselors and educators within their respective work and field (ACES, 1993). As part of this effort, guidelines were adopted by an executive council to reflect the best practices in supervision and which point out that supervisors are to acknowledge, attend to, and integrate practices related to multicultural diversity and development. These standards and guidelines align with the description provided in the ACA Code of Ethics (2005) that supervisors and counselor educators are to recognize multicultural perspectives in teaching, training and supervising. The primary focus of ASERVIC, a division of ACA, is to expand the knowledge base about best practices for working with religious and spiritual beliefs in counseling. ASERVIC (2009) has nine basic competencies intended to guide practitioners on how to best integrate and understand spiritual and religious beliefs in a counseling setting. They include (a) knowing the difference between religion and spirituality, (b) describing how spiritual and religious practices are used in different cultural settings, (c) exploring one's spiritual and religious beliefs to recognize different and diverse belief systems, (d) understanding spiritual development, (e) developing acceptance and sensitivity to different spiritual and religious beliefs, (f) recognizing the counselor's own limits in knowledge about different beliefs, (g) recognizing how to use clients' spiritual and religious beliefs in a counseling setting, (h) understanding different religious and spiritual themes in clients' stories, and (i) using clients' spiritual and religious beliefs in reaching the clients' therapeutic goals. These competencies can help counselor education faculty who desire to include training on religious and spiritual competencies within their courses and programs. The competencies can be used by counselor educators in their teaching practices to help students gain awareness of appropriate and ethical procedures related to the inclusion of religious and spiritual concepts in counseling. Modeling the competencies for students

both inside and outside of the classroom helps them see how the competencies can be applied in a variety of circumstances. Infusing the ASERVIC competencies in counselor training programs helps students recognize the importance of both knowing their own views on religion and spirituality, as well as learning how to gain insight into the religious and spiritual views of their clients.

CACREP (2009) outlined the importance of teaching students, at both the master's and doctoral level, about the importance of working with clients from diverse backgrounds including those with a variety of religious and spiritual beliefs. Specific standards include Section II.B.1; E.; G.2.a., b., e.; and Clinical Mental Health Counseling Section E.3. Counselor educators are encouraged to teach students about the current trends and knowledge in the counseling field regarding work within a diverse and multicultural society, allow for self-exploration and learning through experiential teaching activities, and educate students about ways in which counselors assist clients through the promotion of social justice, advocacy, and wellness activities. Also, CACREP informs counselor educators that they are to educate students on the current theories, approaches, strategies, and techniques that are effective when working with specific populations. This can include work with clients of diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. Current efforts to increase the use of training methods to help students explore their own values and beliefs and learn practical skills to incorporate religion and spirituality in the counseling setting highlight that this is an on-going process.

The Educational Value of Including Religious and Spiritual Learning

As our professional ethical codes have illustrated, it is important that counselors in training receive adequate and appropriate instruction surrounding religious and spiritual issues that arise in counseling relationships. By training counselors to recognize the importance of incorporating a client's religious and spiritual values into the counseling process, counselors will become more comfortable in addressing these issues with clients. The incorporation of clients' religious and spiritual perspectives also allows them to perceive that their beliefs and values are respected by counselors. The perception of counselor respect for client beliefs is significant for some client populations. For example, in the study conducted by Stanley et al. (2011), older Christian adults seeking help with anxiety and depression preferred and had better counseling outcomes when religion and spirituality were incorporated into the counseling process.

Pargament (2007) noted that counselors learn and come to understand much related to disorders and mental health functioning, but know little about religion and spirituality and how it may be beneficial to a client's mental health and well-being. Therefore, to be clinically and ethically sound, members of the counseling profession are encouraged to integrate their clients' religious and spiritual beliefs into counseling services, with clients who desire such integration (Duba & Watts, 2009; Watts, 2001, 2007). By working with counselors in training early and often within counselor education programs, counselor educators and supervisors can begin to start the professional growth process and help students learn how and when to address religious and spiritual issues with clients. There is a variety of approaches that can be taken by educators and supervisors in teaching about religious and spiritual issues in counseling. These include developing specific courses about religious and spiritual training or incorporating

learning throughout the program in a variety of courses. Cashwell and Young (2004) indicated that there is a need for increased training both in specific courses and through the inclusion of religious and spiritual issues in other courses. At the same time, it is clear that training is not incorporated consistently in counselor education programs and may be due to the limited preparation and guidance that is given to counselor educators (Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti, 2006). We now will describe different teaching methods and strategies that can be used with students in counselor education programs and discuss how these teaching methods and strategies address students' self-reported concerns and interests in the area of religious and spiritual training.

Current Practices and Obstacles in Teaching About Religious and Spiritual Issues

After a review of current trends of counselor education programs and hearing the voices of students within these programs, there appears to be not only common practices but also common obstacles for faculty in religious and spiritual training. Common practices emerging from academe regarding religion and spiritual training focus on treating the whole person and creating a safe environment for student discussion and learning. Within the counseling profession, students are encouraged to focus on understanding the client as a whole and the presenting problem in the context of the client's worldview. To accomplish this holistic view of clients that would include gaining an understanding of the role religion and/or spirituality plays in the life of the client, students can (a) be taught how to explore the range of religious and spiritual beliefs held by clients as part of the intake process and assessment; (b) complete a research paper focused on comparing and contrasting several religious and spiritual practices; (c) journal about their beliefs concerning the role of religion and spirituality in their own life and the lives of others; and (d) visit different religious institutions and interview the religious and/or spiritual leaders to gain new perspectives concerning different religious practices.

This focus of working with a client as a whole allows a counselor to understand the client within the context of their family, culture, and society. In this regard, a client's religious and/or spiritual beliefs should be explored and recognized as the counselor learns about the client. In a Gallup poll, researchers indicated 56% of people in the United States affirmed religion plays an important role in their daily lives (Gallup Poll Organization, 2008). When counselors explore this significant facet of a client's worldview, counselors are able to fully understand the client and discuss how the religious and/or spiritual beliefs can move the client towards greater emotional growth (Watts, 2008; Watts, Polonyi, & Bornsheuer, 2010).

Furthermore, when discussing issues that create intense emotional reactions from students, such as religion and spirituality, it is imperative that counselor educators and supervisors create a safe and trusting environment for students to discuss and explore their thoughts and emotions associated with this topic. When counselor educators recognize that this topic is difficult for students, they can become "neutral enthusiasts" about the topic (Becker, 2009, p. 703). This allows the educator to respectfully hear student ideas and perspectives and be open to spontaneous thoughts from students regarding the topic. During this time, educators can create discussions based on mutual respect of differing opinions and values. Participating in open and honest discussions teaches students the value of respecting client belief systems, especially when they are

different from the students' beliefs. Becker (2009) encouraged educators to explicitly and implicitly communicate the importance of respectful discussions in the classroom. She stated this can be achieved through verbal and written communication to students and quietly listening to student responses with no judgment. As students perceive the faculty will allow for appropriate and respectful discussion, students are safe to express their ideas about the topic at hand.

One of the most common obstacles reported in the literature is defining religion and spirituality (Becker, 2009; Hodges & Derezotes, 2013). Religion is defined as an organized belief system which includes moral codes of conduct; beliefs about God, a Higher Power, or a Creator; and involvement in a faith community (Religion, 1997). Religion may also include attendance at a church, synagogue, or mosque; participation in prayer and reading of scripture are also religious activities (Richards, Bartz, & O'Grady, 2009). Whereas spirituality is defined as feelings of enlightenment, harmony, vision, transcendence, and connectedness with God, nature, or the universe. It also can include feelings of compassion, love, hope, and a sense of purpose about one's life (Richards et al., 2009). Because of the differences in definitions posed by researchers, many faculty members are hesitant to approach the topic. Becker (2009) confirmed that this difference or "ambiguity" of the definitions of religion and spirituality are difficult for academe to "tolerate" (p. 701).

Another obstacle encountered by counselor educators and supervisors when teaching about the importance of religion and spirituality in counseling is not involving the educators own biases about the topic. Faculty members have significant influence over students and it can be difficult at times for faculty to separate their own values from the teaching and allow students to formulate their own thoughts and ideas about the issue. Just as it is important that counselors not impose their own values on clients (ACA, 2005, A.4.b.), counselor educators should caution themselves against imparting their own values or biases on students. Becker (2009) encouraged faculty to "leave personal agendas" (p. 704) outside the classroom door when delving into the topic of religion and spirituality. Counselor educators can accomplish the task of leaving their personal beliefs outside the classroom by (a) being mindful of the autonomy of each student and our need to avoid imposing our views on students, (b) reflecting upon our thoughts and beliefs about religion and spirituality and how that impacts the way in which we incorporate religious and spiritual issues into training activities, and (c) seeking consultation when it is apparent that personal biases may be impacting what we are teaching.

Strategies to Address Religious and Spiritual Issues in Counselor Education

Many paths lead to learning. Counselor educators are encouraged to continually stay abreast of innovative teaching methods and changes in the counseling field as a whole. By staying up to date, students and new counselors are adequately prepared to work with diverse clients and their presenting concerns. To effectively train students on the varying religious and spiritual issues that arise within the counseling process, faculty and supervisors should also have adequate trainings focused on different religious and spiritual traditions to improve the ability to incorporate this information across the curriculum.

From the emergent themes in our previous national study, we have compiled a list of suggested teaching activities and tasks that counselor educators can implement within their courses to help students develop greater awareness for themselves and their clients regarding religious and spiritual issues in counseling along with practicing new skills and techniques for discussing these issues within the counseling relationship. Providing varied activities and educational opportunities can stimulate student development. Genograms, the use of audiovisual and media materials, service learning projects, and other teaching methods described below are creative processes that can broaden the understanding of the student learner with regards to religious and spiritual issues in counseling

Personal Development

Students' personal development, focusing on a need for greater awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, and personal understanding, was reported by counseling students as an important area of growth throughout their counseling training (Henriksen, Polonyi, Bornsheuer-Boswell, Greger, & Watts, 2013). Henriksen et al. (2013) found that students perceived their growth around awareness of and sensitivity to spirituality and/or religion was not enhanced or discussed in detail during their counselor training. Additionally, students reported they did not gain any new knowledge or personal understanding of the role of spirituality and/or religion in counseling. Students' suggested methods of inclusion for counselor education programs to enhance students' personal development in the area of religion and spirituality to be within workshops, seminars, discussions, experiential learning, and visiting Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, and Muslim mosques.

Workshops, seminars, and experiential learning may include the use of genograms. Genograms are a visual structure mapping patterns, relationships, events, and overall functioning among individuals (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008). While often used as a guide by counselors to examine generational and familial relationships in their work with clients, practices can be extended to include counselor educators and their work with students. In order to facilitate personal growth and development, students are invited to create their own religious/spiritual genogram. Themes for conceptualization can include: (a) religious or denominational affiliations, (b) religious/spiritual experiences, (c) common practices or expressions associated with personal belief systems, (d) patterns and relationships among family or religious community members, and (e) religious/spiritual struggles encountered. From these initial examinations and mapping, students are able to uncover their own beliefs and lived experiences and in return become better prepared to work with clients in the future.

Self-Discovery and Clarification

Another area of concern in student development, as reported by masters and doctoral counseling students, is regarding self-discovery (Henriksen et al., 2013). The reports by those counseling students indicated that their training allowed them to explore, identify, and clarify their personal perceptions, beliefs, and values related to religious and spiritual issues. A method counselor educators and supervisors might use to help students through self-discovery and clarification of their own personal perceptions would be through questionnaires or surveys such as the Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire (Fisher,

1998) or attendance of a religious or spiritual service.

Using questionnaires or surveys helps students begin to explore their own values and beliefs regarding religion and spirituality through self-assessment. These types of assessments can be used in many different places throughout a counseling program such as in a multicultural class, assessment courses, or in a specialized course focusing on religious and spiritual issues in counseling. Kolb (1984) described the different learning styles of students in his Experiential Learning Cycle and stressed using different types of learning activities that address learning styles of students. Also, by encouraging students to attend a religious or spiritual service of a religious or spiritual group different than the students' own assists students in recognizing the religious/spiritual practices within other groups and how these may be different or similar to the students' beliefs and values. These exposure activities also provide for the beginnings of class discussions and reflection activities focusing on respect and understanding of differences.

Religious and Spiritual Competencies

There are many types of competencies counseling students need to be aware of when working with different client populations. Specifically, when working with clients on religious and spiritual issues, the ASERVIC (2009) spiritual competencies ought to be considered because "the competencies for addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling are guidelines that compliment, not supersede, the values and standards espoused in the ACA Code of Ethics" (§ 1). Training students in these competencies can may lead to increased knowledge about the religious/spiritual background of the client and address religious/spiritual issues in a competent and ethical manner. Henriksen et al. (2013) suggested means by which the ASERVIC competencies might be included in counselor education programs. Suggested means included a specific course focused on religious and spiritual issues. Additionally, experiential activities, role plays, personal reflections, and guest speakers might be useful in teaching about the competencies and how to integrate them into work with clients.

One way to help students gain understanding and awareness of the different competencies they need to develop in order to effectively work with clients from different religious/spiritual backgrounds is by interviewing religious leaders from religious and or spiritual traditions different from students' identified traditions. Doing so addresses ASERVIC competencies 1, 5, and 8 (ASERVIC, 2009). Before conducting the interview, students might develop a list of questions they want to ask during the interview to assist them in learning more about the specific religious or spiritual group including the core tenets and foundations followed within that tradition. The interview questions can help fill in the gaps in understanding about the tradition, as well as help recognize the similarities and differences in different religious/spiritual traditions held by clients of faith.

Students also may benefit from a panel discussion with representatives from several different religious and spiritual traditions. Conducting a panel discussion for students can facilitate understanding the values different groups hold and give students the opportunity to ask questions of different leaders within those groups. During a panel discussion, it is important to prepare students in advance of the types of question they might want to ask or specific types of information they might find helpful when working with a client from that religious/spiritual tradition. This is also a time that a faculty

member can lead a discussion about respect of differing values and traditions in order to emphasize the need for appropriate and useful conversations that do not lead to attacks or judgment of different religious and spiritual groups.

A final hands-on activity is having students volunteer as a service learning project at a community-based religious or spiritual program (e.g., school, church, community center), outside of their own experience or knowledge. Requiring students to keep a journal of their learning experiences can assist students in exploring their values, attitudes, and beliefs, while also considering a different spiritual and religious worldview.

Additional Education and Training

Another possibility for infusing training on religious and spiritual issues in counseling could be through additional education and training outside the core requirements for the program. While religious and spiritual issues can be addressed in the multicultural coursework, separate courses can also be offered for more specialized training and knowledge. Faculty might consider including workshops, seminars, podcasts, and online training.

One way in which counselor educators may help students through additional education is through the completion of an independent study focused on the religious or spiritual writing of a group different than the students. A review of the Pew Forum (2013) concluded that there is diversity among populations in the United States in regard to religious/spiritual affiliations, faith beliefs and values, religious/spiritual traditions, and religious/spiritual practices. Students can gain a practical knowledge and understanding of these dimensions. Counselor educators can use this independent study to collectively explore student biases and personal assumptions while also teaching students how to take into account a client's diverse culture when providing counseling services.

A complementary model highlighting critical thinking and learning in the classroom is the use of technology (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). Technology can be a helpful tool in providing additional training about these issues. Tools such as film, videos, PowerPoint, You Tube clips, CDs, and Web-based informational sites provide a creative foundation allowing students to explore the many dimensions of religion/spirituality from around the world. Socratic questioning following the designed lesson can support course goals and learning objectives. Such integrative approaches support the acquisition of religious/spiritual knowledge while engaging students to reflect on their own beliefs and ideas.

Supervision

Alongside the courses and classroom activities that infuse religious and spiritual issues in counseling, students will also benefit from a focus on these issues in their supervision sessions. Clinical supervision is important to students' professional development and understanding of the counseling process. In their study, Henriksen et al. (2013) suggested that most student supervision meetings did not address how to competently include discussions about religion and spirituality with clients. Henriksen et al. found that students perceived discussions about religious and spiritual issues with their supervisors as an influential part of student growth.

Supervisors might find it beneficial for student growth and development to encourage students to create a community resource handbook that contains information

about the many religious and spiritual groups within the service area. To further student growth and development in supervision or in the classroom, this student activity allows for a substantive view of one's community, enhancing knowledge and awareness. Furthermore, the resources handbook can be of professional use when working in various settings or with different client groups.

Conclusion

Counselor education programs continue to increase the level of diversity in their training activities and because of the increasing multiplicity of religious and spiritual perspectives among students and society, the need for inclusion of this training is necessary. Little research has provided counselor educators with the tools necessary to increase religious and spiritual training and few recommendations to enhance training have been provided. With the inclusion of the recommended activities in this manuscript, counselor education programs can help students increase their competence to effectively meet the religious and spiritual needs of clients. As counselor programs increase religious and spiritual training, future research focused on the growth and development of counselors in the area of religious and spiritual competence can be conducted.

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