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International Education and Service Learning: Approaches Toward Cultural Competency and Social Justice

The Counseling Psychologist

2014, Vol. 42(8) 1188–1214

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DOI: 10.1177/0011000014557499

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Abstract

The field of counseling psychology continues to see a perpetual underutilization of mental health resources by many cultural groups, including international populations. Underutilization of services is due, in part, to psychologists' deficiency in cultural and international competency. International education—an experiential learning technique that involves cultural contact—has been proposed as an alternative method for training students to work effectively cross-culturally. The current article examines the effects of service learning embedded in a study abroad diversity course in Singapore. The course was designed for graduate counseling psychology students as an experiential vehicle for developing cultural competency and awareness of social justice issues through direct contact with diverse groups. Qualitative data are reviewed, and implications for training, such as integration of cross-cultural and social justice issues in counseling training programs, are discussed.

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Keywords

multiculturalism, content, social justice, training

In the last few decades, the United States has experienced an increase in cultural groups, including international populations. In the field of counseling psychology, this demographic shift has been highlighted by research indicating that members of underrepresented racial, ethnic, and international groups are either not accessing counseling services or are discontinuing services early (Kim & Lyons, 2003; Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, & Lucas, 2004). Practitioners and researchers alike assert that the lack of utilization of these resources is due, in part, to psychologists' deficiency in cultural and international competency (Bernal & Castro, 1994; Hurley & Gerstein, 2013; Yutrzenka, 1995).

Awareness, knowledge, and skills are outlined in the current literature as the three components of cultural competency that professionals need to develop to become culturally competent psychologists (S. Sue, 2006). Furthermore, research has shown that there is a positive relationship between psychologists' cultural competency and therapy outcomes (Kim & Lyons, 2003). Although graduate programs have made gains in training and developing students to become culturally competent practitioners, developing competency in this domain remains a challenge for the field of psychology (S. Sue, 2006). In addition, the trend of globalization and increasing interconnectivity of countries and cultures continues to shift the demographics within many countries. As such, Hurley and Gerstein (2013) suggested that the new area for growth in our understanding of diversity and cultural factors in mental health is the international movement. Thus, it is imperative that counseling psychology training programs continue to vigorously innovate training methods to promote the development of cultural and international competency in our practitioners.

Arthur and Achenbach (2002) suggested that experiential learning can facilitate development of cultural competence and can be a tool to "raise awareness about multicultural issues, to challenge students' personal frameworks about cultural diversity, and to help them develop cultural empathy" (p. 3). Furthermore, students who complete diversity classes report that experiential learning was a critical part of personal and professional development (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). In addition, cultural contact (i.e., experiential interaction with individuals of differing racial and ethnic origin) has been shown to have a positive impact on cultural competency training.

International education or study abroad is a form of experiential learning where learners are immersed in a country and culture different from their own

in hopes of gaining insight into their own, and others', cultural perspectives. There exists a body of knowledge elucidating the effectiveness of academic study abroad experiences in enhancing aspects of cultural competency (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Gilin & Young, 2009; Jackson, 2008; Pedersen, 2009). However, much of the study abroad literature exists at the undergraduate level (Behrmd & Porzelt, 2012; Kitsantas, 2004; Pedersen, 2010; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Thus, research into the effects of experiential approaches (e.g., study abroad and service learning) on cross-cultural development may further our understanding of how to effectively teach and train students within graduate-level counseling psychology programs (Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 2001; S. Sue, Zane, Nagayama-Hall, & Berger, 2009).

Cultural Competency in Training and Education

The three dimensions of awareness and beliefs, knowledge, and skills have stood as a lucid, well-researched component model of cultural competency (Jennings et al., 2012); however, the literature lacks practical suggestions for education and training in cultural competency (S. Sue, 2006). Although training programs incorporate diversity courses into the curriculum, Gushue (2004) found color-blind racial attitudes are still prevalent and continue to influence the clinical judgments of graduate clinical and counseling psychology students. Reassuringly, there is growing literature on how best to implement cultural competency training in education curriculum (Lowman, 2013; McHatton, Keller, Shircliffe, & Zalaquett, 2009; Rogers, 2006). Despite these efforts, there remains relatively little empirical information regarding effective ways to educate and train psychologists in cultural competency (Coleman, 2006; Kim & Lyons, 2003; Pieterse, Evans, Risner-Butner, Collins, & Mason, 2009).

Experiential Learning

In an effort to explore effective cultural competency–inclusive training models both inside and outside the traditional classroom, Kim and Lyons (2003) proposed the use of experiential activities to enhance cultural competence in psychology trainees. In particular, the authors propose the use of experiential activities as learning tools that encourage students to safely explore themselves, how it feels to operate within a set of specified rules, and practice strategies they may use with diverse clients. Other studies not only validate the effectiveness of experiential learning but also demonstrate the

self-reflection and examination it instigates (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Che, Spearman, & Manizade, 2009).

Dickson and Jepson (2007) proposed three additional dimensions critical to encouraging cultural competency in training: cognitive, affective, and consciousness-raising activities. In a later article, building upon the work of Arredondo (1999), Dickson, Jepson, and Barbee (2008) stated that addressing cognitive beliefs and affective reactions is a critical and highly self-reflective process aimed at addressing the psychologist trainee's own prejudices and behaviors. Dickson et al. argued that if a counseling psychology education program is able to initiate this self-reflective process and create a positive and culturally integrated atmosphere, trainees will demonstrate increased cultural awareness. Cultural contact with diverse individuals, as well as experiential and participatory learning, was a strategy cited as being effective in initiating psychologist trainee self-reflection. Similarly, Niehuis (2005), Gushue and Constantine (2007), and Liu, Pickett, and Ivey (2007) found that trainee self-reflection could enhance cultural competency by encouraging awareness of social and racial privilege.

Cultural Contact and Service Learning

Cultural contact has been shown to have a positive impact on cultural competency training (Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001). Encouraging intercultural contact can significantly influence intercultural acceptance, cross-cultural knowledge, and openness (Geelhoed, Abe, & Talbot, 2003). Toporek and Reza (2001) wrote that developing attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, and skill in the classroom helps students intellectually understand differences and similarities between cultures, and that traditional classroom training helps to reduce cognitive prejudicial racial attitudes. However, traditional learning environments that focus on intellectual activities such as reading, writing, and discussions, are not effective in reducing affective prejudicial racial attitudes, that is, attitudes about situations or events that affect students personally (Toporek & Reza, 2001). Experiences such as counseling diverse clients and interacting with supervisors who are members of various ethnic groups help to reduce prejudicial affective racial attitudes (Toporek & Reza, 2001). This kind of experiential learning facilitates learning in the cognitive and affective domain.

Bringle and Hatcher (2009) suggested that one way to increase cultural contact is through service learning, defined as:

A course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further

understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (p. 38)

Service learning is an effective tool in promoting social justice training (Toporek, Kwan, & Williams, 2012) and enhancing cultural competency (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004). A major goal of a service learning course is to create an opportunity for students to deeply reflect upon their service experience and to begin to recognize existing power structures of the dominant culture and the deleterious effects (e.g., oppression, prejudice, bias, stereotyping, microaggressions, microinvalidations, etc.) these structures have on social justice.

Service learning is a particular subset of experiential learning and can be distinguished from other experiential learning such as practica and internship by its integration into coursework and its focus on community service (Ball, 2008; Burnett et al., 2004; Delve, Mintz, & Stewart, 1990). Service learning may not be mutually exclusive from practica learning experiences; however, practica and internship are focused on the development of students' skills in practice, whereas service learning has the specifically stated goals of developing students' civic engagement in which a student is learning to work with a particular community rather than providing a service for a particular community (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Burnett et al., 2004).

Although domestic cultural contact and service learning represent a positive movement toward building cultural competency, they appear to have one major limitation. Domestic cultural contact occurs within the sociopolitical context of the dominant society and, therefore, is inherently limited in its ability to promote social justice and cultural competency. More specifically, it is challenging to recognize dominant culture power structures when an individual, particularly an individual from the dominant culture, is still swimming in the dominant culture fishbowl, so to speak. Thus, new, adjunctive strategies need to be examined that can account for this limitation of domestic cultural contact. Study abroad and international service learning (Bringle, Hatcher, & Jones, 2011; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010) experiences specifically aimed at building cultural competency could provide a supplemental avenue that accounts for domestic cultural contact limitations. That is, service learning embedded within an intensive study abroad experience may provide the requisite cultural contact without the limitations inherent in living and working within one's own "cultural fishbowl."

International Education

As defined earlier, international education is a form of experiential learning where learners are immersed in a country and culture different from their own

in hopes of gaining insight into their own, and others', cultural perspective. To maximally affect the development of cultural awareness, study abroad experiences must move beyond superficial "tourist travel" to include carefully planned cultural immersion experiences (Kambutu & Nganga, 2008). Through such events, the individual experiences the new culture without an ethnocentric lens, resulting in culturally "disorienting dilemmas" (Kambutu & Nganga, 2008, p. 491). Culturally disorienting dilemmas serve as a catalyst for individual transformation by compelling individuals to confront their cultural paradigms and, subsequently, acquire new schemas and paradigms about the world. However, for transformation of meaning to occur, both experience and reflection upon those experiences are necessary (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Engaging in such critical reflection can lead to broadening one's frame of reference, discarding old ideas, and adapting new ways of thinking, leading to changes in assumptions and worldviews (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011).

In the study abroad literature, such disorientation or dissonance is referred to as "culture shock" (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Research has identified feelings associated with culture shock, including feelings of panic, anxiety, alienation, frustration, and helplessness (Pusch & Merrill, 2008). Despite these feelings, literature has highlighted that students demonstrate personal growth and empathy due to feelings of being an outsider in an uncertain and unfamiliar environment (Tang & Choi, 2004; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011, Willard-Holt, 2001). For study abroad experiences to have a strong foundation, students need to reflect upon their cultural backgrounds and biases. This self-exploration allows students to examine how their cultural upbringing affects their interpretation of events and influences thought, behavior, and their worldview.

International Education and Counseling Psychology

Although there are considerable challenges for institutions and students to become involved in international study or field experience, there is a growing desire on the part of educators and students to become more competent in working cross-nationally and cross-culturally (Gilin & Young, 2009). Research shows that (a) there are many U.S. ethnic and racial groups that fail to receive adequate mental health services, (b) health and mental health discrepancies exist among ethnic and racial minorities compared with individuals of European descent, and (c) psychologist cultural competency plays a role in these discrepancies (Chang & Berk, 2009). Similarly, international students, who make up 8% of the college student population in the United States, account for only 2.6% of the client base of U.S. college counseling

centers. Moreover, only 2% of the international college student population sought counseling and one third did not return after the initial intake (Nilsson et al., 2004). Clearly, there is a great need for U.S. mental health practitioners to develop both cultural and international competencies. As Hurley and Gerstein (2013) noted, “An international focus for U.S. mental health professionals is no longer optional, but essential” (p. 230).

What is unclear or lacking in the literature is how a study abroad experience affects the cultural competency of counseling psychology graduate students—not only their beliefs and knowledge but also their ability to work effectively with racially and ethnically diverse individuals (S. Sue, 1998). As globalization continues to produce significant demographic shifts within many countries, Hurley and Gerstein (2013) suggested that the new area for growth in our understanding of diversity and cultural factors in mental health is the international movement. Developing international competencies would prepare mental health professionals to effectively address the “diversity within diversity” that is burgeoning by increased international diversity within the United States, as well as other countries (Healy, 2004, p. 307). Moreover, utilizing an international context can further enhance the applicability of multicultural counseling and social justice interventions to more adequately incorporate a broader array of cultural values and limit a Eurocentric worldview.

The counseling psychology literature offers a number of suggestions regarding how to incorporate training opportunities for internationalizing programs, including international training experiences domestically and abroad, opportunities to travel to international conferences and engage in international research, inviting international guest speakers to their institution, and incorporating reading materials from other countries (Leung & Ponterotto, 2003; Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009). In the United States, multicultural and social justice approaches to mental health services are grounded in the ideals of democracy, equity, and self-determination (Graham, 1999). These held values are based on the political and social contexts of the United States and may not be appropriate when applying social justice principles when working with people from other countries with different social and political histories and views of psychology (Leung & Chen, 2009). Turner-Essel and Waehler (2009) summarized this point, “working to become effective in a multicultural sense entails working with respect for cultural contexts outside of one’s own: Developing a more international perspective helps to cultivate such respect” (p. 894).

It is unclear just how many counseling psychology training programs participate in study abroad/international education activities. After a review of the literature, apparently no studies yet exist regarding how study abroad affects

the cultural competency of counseling psychology graduate students. In fact, only two articles in a literature search addressed study abroad and counseling training (Heppner, 2006; Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004). In addition to a literature search, we conducted an informal survey of training directors through the Council of Counseling Psychology Training Programs listserv and found that, besides the College of Education, Leadership, and Counseling at the University of St. Thomas (UST), there are at least seven other counseling psychology programs in the United States that have engaged in some form of international education programming. Apparently, there is at least a modest amount of international education programming occurring in counseling psychology, yet little has been documented on the impact of such training. In the present article, we hope to add to the literature by providing an illustrative example and qualitative findings of service learning embedded within a study abroad diversity course in Singapore. This course is a nontraditional experiential teaching method currently being implemented to promote cultural competency and social justice values in graduate counseling psychology students.

Diversity Issues in Counseling in Singapore

Course Objectives

The course, Diversity Issues in Counseling in Singapore, explores fundamental issues concerning the practice of providing psychological services for people from different cultural, ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds, including those in historically marginalized groups. In this course, students traveled to and studied in the diverse country of Singapore.

The course has a number of objectives: (a) to learn Singaporean values pertaining to psychology; (b) to live and study in another culture as the “other” to better understand what it is like to be culturally different; (c) to live abroad and experience the world through another cultural worldview that is not dominated by U.S. culture and values; (d) to learn how psychotherapy is conducted in a setting such as Singapore; (e) to understand the influence of culture on development; (f) to understand the importance of therapists’ social skills and cultural sensibilities; (g) to increase awareness of one’s own cultural background and personal biases including the complexity of culture-related issues in therapy; (h) to gain a deeper understanding of the sociohistorical and cultural realities of racial, ethnic, and nonethnic marginalized groups (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT]) in the United States and other regions of the world such as Singapore; and finally (i) to begin to apply cross-cultural counseling skills through a service learning project within a diverse community.

Course Logistics

The second author has led three short-term study abroad courses to Singapore, whereas the first and third authors were students in the course. The course is divided into three major activities: (a) shared class time with master's level counseling Singaporean students at Singapore's National Institute of Education (NIE) at Nanyang Technological University, (b) site visits to mental health settings, and (c) a service learning experience. Additional activities included exploration of distinct ethnic communities within Singapore (e.g., Little India, Chinatown, and the Malay Gaylang neighborhood) and places of worship (e.g., Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu, Muslim mosques and temples). Finally, the length of stay (31 days) afforded the students a moderate sense of immersion into the multitude of Singapore cultures.

The cost of the program, per student, was USD\$4,600. The course fee included three credits of graduate tuition, 31 nights hotel accommodation, ground transportation, some meals (breakfasts and planned group meals), and expenses related to class activities (e.g., museums; boat service to nearby island; day trip to Malacca, Malaysia; honorarium for guides and speakers). NIE generously granted UST students cost-free access to classroom space and instruction. Our university's College of Education, Leadership, and Counseling subsidized approximately US\$1,500 of each student's tuition in an effort to grow and support international education opportunities for students. Airfare was arranged and purchased by students, with the typical fare ranging between US\$1,200 and US\$1,800.

The second author, who taught for 2 years at NIE, coordinated academic activities with former colleagues at NIE. A major component of the course was to share class time and collaborate in learning with Singaporean counseling graduate students. UST students attended several 3-hr Singaporean courses over a 3-week period (i.e., Multicultural Diversity in Counseling, Group Counseling, and Theories and Techniques of Basic Skills in Counseling). UST students joined the classes after the first week of instruction so that the Singaporean students were informed of the planned joint class experiences. All NIE instructors were open to sharing class time with UST students and recognized the mutual benefit of such cross-cultural interactions.

Another major task was to coordinate site visits to various mental health services in Singapore. From previous research on expert therapists in Singapore (Jennings et al., 2008; Jennings et al., 2012), the second author maintained an ongoing relationship with a number of practitioners in various settings such as family service centers, college counseling centers, hospitals, and private practice. In addition, one Singaporean colleague was well

connected with indigenous helpers such as shamans and traditional Chinese medicine practitioners, and graciously led several visits and dialogues with these healers.

A final major task was arranging the service learning experience. The second author asked former NIE colleagues if they were aware of any nonprofit agencies interested in a shared learning experience with UST counseling psychology graduate students. DaySpring Residential Treatment Centre (DaySpring), a residential treatment home for abused teen girls, was recommended and the director readily accepted our proposal to provide psychoeducational training to the residents.

Who Am I, Culturally Speaking?

This article assignment was given so students had the opportunity to reflect upon their cultural heritage and learn about its influence on development. Self-understanding is the first step to becoming a multiculturally competent therapist (D. W. Sue & Sue, 2012). Students were required to draw from a genogram, community genogram, interviews with relatives, and assigned readings to further their understanding of their own cultural development.

Lectures and Interviews

This experience included lectures and interviews with Singaporean expert therapists who provide psychological services to communities in Singapore. Lectures included topics of multicultural counseling in Singapore with a wide range of clients including the ethnically diverse, LGBT, and the elderly. Interviews with expert therapists focused on their personal and professional characteristics and how each worked with diverse populations. At the end of each day, the instructor gathered with the students to critically reflect on the events of the day, including reactions and insights into each student's own cultural worldview and biases.

Cross-Cultural Interview

Students conducted a structured interview with a member of a culturally distinct group living in Singapore to understand their perception of psychological services and preferred methods of seeking help. Following the interview, students completed a summary of what they learned from persons of this cultural group, specifically about their help-seeking behavior and perceptions. The summary included a self-analysis about students' feelings of comfort/discomfort with the interview experience.

Cultural Immersion Experience Paper and Presentation

In groups, students researched in-depth one of the ethnic/culturally distinct groups living in Singapore and wrote a report on cultural characteristics of that group. Students were asked to identify gender and other identity issues within each culture. As much as possible, students were encouraged to immerse themselves in the culture through interviews, field visits, reading biographies or autobiographies, poetry, plays, events, film, songs, cuisine, and so forth. Students were cautioned about not stereotyping members of the group and encouraged to recognize that within-group differences are as significant as between-group differences. Students reflected on their experience as a multicultural being based on the immersion experience as well as time spent in Singapore. In an effort to share the benefits of students' experience with others, presentations on each group's cultural immersion experience were conducted for the UST campus community upon the group's return.

Service Learning Project

Students engaged in a service learning project in Singapore by providing psychoeducational programming at DaySpring. The DaySpring program is the only residential program in Singapore serving adolescent girls who are the survivors of abuse. This experience provided a unique opportunity for students to engage in developing and implementing psychoeducational curriculum and activities that were culturally, developmentally, and issue relevant. Exposure to innovative programming in a political and philanthropic system that has many structural differences compared with the United States offered students the opportunity to explore how social justice approaches function in different systems. This allowed students to consider how social justice and advocacy may function cross-culturally while being attentive to issues surrounding value-imposition.

Direct service with the youth at DaySpring engaged graduate students in the consideration of multiple factors when designing their curriculum, including the relevancy of topics, appropriateness of activities, group dynamics, ethical implications, as well as culturally different communication styles. Psychoeducational programming included topics such as developing and maintaining friendships and dealing with peer pressure. Being engaged in this activity over the course of weeks, gave students the opportunity to reflect individually, as a group, and with DaySpring staff, allowing for curriculum adjustments to meet the needs of the youth involved.

To better understand the impact of international education and service learning on counseling psychology students' development of cultural competency

and awareness of social justice issues, investigators designed a qualitative pilot study examining the impact of the diversity course described above. In addition, the authors hoped that the current study would inform the design of a future large-scale study examining the impact of such a course on counseling psychology students' development of cultural competency and social justice values.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted at a midsize liberal arts university in the Midwest. Qualitative data were gathered via survey method regarding the experience of students who took part in the short-term (4-week) study abroad course. Participants were students in master of arts degree and doctor of psychology degree programs in counseling psychology. Of the three trips offered (2010, 2011, 2013), 46 students completed the course. For this study, students from the 2011 and 2013 courses were asked to participate. Of these 28 students, 20 agreed to participate. Nine of 12 students (8 master's level, 1 doctoral level) from the 2011 course and 11 of 16 students (9 master's level, 2 doctoral level) from the 2013 course made up the participant pool. The following is the demographic breakdown of participants: master's level students ($n = 17$; 15 females, 2 males; 13 Euro-Americans, 2 Asian Americans, 1 Arab American, 1 Multiracial) and doctoral-level students ($n = 3$; 2 females, 1 male; 1 Asian American, 2 Multiracial).

Participant Selection

The course, Diversity Issues in Counseling in Singapore, is a variation of the course, Diversity Issues in Counseling, which is offered on campus as a semester-long course. Master's level students are required to take one of these courses as part of the master of arts in counseling psychology core curriculum to successfully fulfill degree requirements. This course was offered as an elective to PsyD students, who were also required to complete a doctoral-level course on diversity. Participants were selected and obtained based on their enrollment in the study abroad course.

Materials

The nine participants from the 2011 study abroad trip were given a questionnaire at 4 months posttrip and asked the following two questions: (a) "How has this course affected your learning and growth as a culturally competent practitioner?" (i.e., "What was helpful?" "What encouraged or facilitated

growth and learning?” “What was impactful about this course?”); and (b) “In what ways could this course be improved to increase and enhance your multicultural competency?” (i.e., “What was missing?” “What did you need more of?” “What impeded your growth and learning?”).

To better understand the impact of the course on students’ development, a more in-depth online survey was administered to the 11 participants from the 2013 study abroad trip at 1 year posttrip. The participants were asked the following five questions: (a) What was the impact, if any, of your participation in a study abroad/service learning program on you as an individual? (b) What influence, if any, has your participation in a study abroad/service learning had on your theoretical perspective of counseling work? (c) What influence, if any, has your participation in a study abroad/service learning program had on the ways in which you provide counseling services? (d) In what ways, if any, has the study abroad/service learning program affected the development of your cultural competency, in terms of awareness and beliefs, knowledge, and skills? and (e) What suggestions, if any, do you have that may add depth or breadth to a similar study abroad/service learning program based on your experience? Each question ended with the request to “Please be as specific as possible, including examples, etc.”

Data Analysis

Data from both surveys were analyzed using qualitative methods. The length of written responses ranged from a short paragraph to one page in length. The qualitative data gathered were analyzed using the sensitizing concepts of cultural competency and social justice (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). The second and third authors worked as a team to analyze the data from the 2013 course survey. This research team conducted a paragraph by paragraph content analysis of responses and then organized coded quotations within themes (Patton, 2002). Once the preliminary thematic structure with quotations was completed, the first author analyzed the data from the 2011 course survey and also placed quotations within preliminary themes. All three researchers then worked together to combine data from both surveys to finalize the themes and placement of quotes within themes. Only the quotations that best represent the themes are presented below.

Results

Analysis of the data resulted in four prominent themes: (a) movement toward cultural competence, (b) social justice, (c) service learning, and (d) international education. Because of the self-report nature of the findings, the reader

should note that the following descriptions reflect the students' self-perceptions of competency development.

Movement Toward Cultural Competence

The most robust theme identified, movement toward cultural competence, was further divided into three subthemes consistent with S. Sue's (2006) tripartite model of cultural competence: awareness of self and bias, knowledge of culture, and multicultural skills. Like S. Sue's model, cultural competence was conceptualized as an ever-evolving process that does not indicate someone has arrived at, or achieved, competence, but rather, as moving toward competence and growing in the areas of awareness, knowledge, and skills.

Awareness of self and bias. The subtheme that captured student development in awareness and beliefs focused on self-awareness and recognition of biases. One participant reflected,

Being made aware of my own behavior and thoughts really forced me to confront the cultural values and judgments I was implicitly placing on cultures different from my own. Of my many biases, one cross-cultural bias I have come to have a better understanding of, which relates to my "Americanness," is my bias against political systems and governments of different countries. In particular, I noticed 2 times where I implicitly and explicitly placed value judgments on various non-American political systems and governments. The first incident was in seeing a Singaporean anticrime sign. Specifically, the sign warned against weapons possession by citing the punishment of imprisonment and, to my surprise, the number of cane strokes associated with each weapon. Intellectually, I knew the practice of caning to be a cultural difference, but when I saw caning written out I could not help but have a strong and judgmental reaction to it. The punishment of being caned is so alien to me I made the implicit assumption it must be wrong for a government to do.

Another participant stated,

This experience has shaped me personally by helping me be mindful of ways that I can retreat into safe spaces of intellectualized diversity and move through life within comfortable networks of people. I believe this experience has helped me have an ongoing conversation with myself about my cross-cultural development, as well as helping me become aware of my blind spots in working with those who are culturally different than me.

In addition, one participant shared,

The study abroad program first helped me really look at my cultural identity. It expanded my view to more than just my race and ethnicity. I now also look at country of origin, socioeconomic status, religion, gender roles, and many other aspects of myself. I think it is important to know my own identity in order to be a good counselor. Knowing myself better, I am now more aware of some of my previous blind spots. I am also more aware of when there is countertransference between the client and me.

Furthermore, a participant noted,

The more I looked at my own ways of being and biases, the more I desired to become more cross-culturally sensitive. The more I interacted with the Singaporean culture, and subcultures, the more self-conscious and embarrassed I became at how little I knew about the Singaporean culture. In my interactions with Singaporeans, it seemed that many had a level of knowledge about America that greatly shadowed my knowledge of Singapore, and I began to view it as a manifestation of my privilege as an American. I really felt I had in a way failed to show the host country and its citizens a proper level of respect by not taking much time to learn about the culture. In many ways I felt greatly disappointed in myself. However, this disappointment served as an experiential moment reminding me that my thinking and consideration must extend beyond America if I am to develop my cultural sensitivity.

Knowledge of cultures. This subtheme summarized students' experience with gaining knowledge of another's culture and an understanding of their own. For example, one participant remarked,

The time I spent in Southeast Asia afforded me countless opportunities to see, smell, taste, hear, and dive into innumerable aspects of culture. First, I tackled the very definition of culture. I did this in our class assignment ("Who am I culturally speaking?"), late night talks with my roommates, and in many moments during our NIE classes. It was an incredible experience to really be a part of those things that I could only read about before. The experiences I had in Singapore made something I had always wanted to know so badly become more than just words and intellectual knowledge. They became the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds of living them.

One participant shared,

I am far less anxious about being culturally competent as I was entering the study abroad program. I thought before the trip I needed to learn as much as possible about a culture to become competent. Since the trip I see that this is not the case. When I am providing counseling, I need to ask the client what their culture means to them. I need to clarify when I do not understand or when

I think I understand what the client has said, and lastly I also need to read and learn about their culture from other sources as well.

Multicultural skills. This subtheme described students' perceived acquisition of multicultural skills as a result of the course and their time abroad. A participant wrote,

First, my time in Southeast Asia provided me with a direct, pragmatic education in *how* to bring culture into counseling. I learned specific techniques and lines of questioning that I am now able to employ in my work as a beginning counselor. With these tools, I can now bring culture into the therapeutic process much more effectively and skillfully than I would have been able to before. Furthermore, I gained flexibility as well as the willingness and skillfulness to adapt to the particular person(s) in front of me. Personally, the cumulative study abroad/service learning experience cultivated within me a newfound proficiency and multicultural competence.

In addition, one participant noted,

Questions surrounding race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, spirituality, and the like are easy to fear until we learn how to ask them. My experiences in Singapore helped me to face and conquer that fear. During my time abroad I didn't just observe others asking these questions nor did I simply learn some possible questions I could ask. I did observe and learn, but I was also granted the opportunity to practice. The in-class activities, homework assignments, and service learning meetings asked me to feel the discomfort of stepping into someone else's world.

Social Justice

Participant responses demonstrated an increased awareness of social justice issues and an opportunity to begin to recognize existing power structures of the dominant culture and the negative impact these systems can have on social justice. One participant reflected,

My further developed cultural awareness through this experience has led me toward practicing a social justice model of counseling, where I truly meet the client where they are at in their story in terms of personal culture, heritage and group culture, and broad systemic factors.

Another student wrote, "During my study abroad I thought a lot about my own race, personal beliefs and stereotypes as well as white privilege and how that manifests itself at home and abroad." Another participant reflected,

Participation in this program has highlighted for me the necessity of listening and observing more carefully. Not only in terms of others but also in terms of myself and my own reactions, assumptions, and judgments. I had the unique advantage of participating in this program twice, at two different points in my educational career and it was my experience that both experiences were very different. This had a lot to do with my own perspectives at the times of the trip and personal growth and changes in between them. These experiences have strengthened my theoretical perspective of counseling work. My theoretical perspective relies heavily on the theories of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and critical theory. My experiences in the study abroad/service learning programs have confirmed the importance of understanding the way language and meaning are constructed, the impacts of systems of power and oppression, and the value of raising awareness when necessary to enhance an individual's or a community's ability to cope with stressors related to functioning within systems of power and oppression.

One participant shared,

Participating in the study abroad service learning program impacted me as an individual by first inviting me to take more time to reflect on the varying intersections of my different social identities and their attendant privileged or oppressed statuses in varying contexts. For instance, it was my experience that my ethnic and racial identity was perceived very differently in Singapore than it is in the United States and not solely in the context of where I fit in, in terms of social status within a particular place—but, how I was perceived period. For example, in the United States I am frequently perceived as white as I am fair skinned. However, in Singapore the number of times I was perceived as being Indian was significantly greater. This invited introspection on how we as human beings function socially, how shifting perspectives may have a significant impact on how we contextualize another, and how intricate deconstructing a situation can become.

Service Learning

Participant responses indicated that service learning was an effective tool in promoting social justice training and enhancing cultural competency. One participant wrote,

Our involvement with the DaySpring program especially stood out to me as an important practice in cross-cultural immersion, using multicultural awareness, and building skills in a therapeutic setting. It was very meaningful to complete a service-learning project with DaySpring, because I feel I learn best when I am getting out of the classroom and immersed in an experience. The interaction

with DaySpring girls was a direct experience in working cross-culturally, which helped me develop more awareness around what makes up my worldview. In our first meeting with the girls, I felt very culturally unaware since I was unsure of what to ask about that would be relevant for them to their life in Singapore. In those early conversations, I started to understand how “Singaporean” could mean different things to different people, just as “American” can signify different backgrounds, faiths, and beliefs. I also gained cultural awareness through the practice of letting the girls be the expert. By encouraging the girls to use their own experiences to explain their feelings and thoughts in discussion, I once again learned to never assume what a person feels or thinks.

Another participant shared,

The service learning project helped me to cultivate the valuable skills I was learning about, put them into practice, do good for others, and do good for myself. This experience helped me to feel the discomfort of not knowing what to say but also the relief of being able to “just be.” It allowed me the opportunity to be compassionately curious about one girl’s experience and her perceptions of her experience. It provided evidence to myself that I could form relationships and nurture connections across cultural, societal, and individual lines.

International Education

Participant feedback described the impact of engaging in international education and international service learning as a mechanism for addressing the inherent limitation to domestic cultural contact. That is, domestic cultural contact occurs within the sociopolitical context of the dominant society and often is limited in its ability to promote social justice and cultural competency. One participant shared,

I think a graduate level study abroad is an amazing experience and I think more programs should offer them. If there had been another study abroad option on the off year I would have done this also. Also, I took the regular cultural competency course prior to the study abroad and the immersive experience is much more eye opening than having discussions in class.

One participant stated,

The experiences of studying abroad and participating in the service learning project helped me piece together the individual in relation to their larger contexts of community, religion, and many other cultural aspects in a way that I probably couldn’t have done if I hadn’t participated in this program.

Sometimes I think we lose sight of our own communities because we're so used to them—so embedded within them.

Finally, one participant reflected,

. . . being in Singapore, I did not have the ability to seek solace in areas of culture where I felt safe, and this lack of safety forced me to move beyond how I was affected and into a deeper analysis of . . . my own values and beliefs.

Discussion

Participant responses highlight patterns found in the existing literature and provided insight into perceived growth in the areas of cultural competence and awareness of social justice issues. All participants named experiential learning broadly, and cultural contact specifically, as an influential component to their intercultural learning. The use of experiential activities allowed students to safely explore their own reactions, how it feels to exist within a different set of rules, and practice strategies to use with diverse clients (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002).

This course was designed to move beyond tourist travel to promote cultural competency and awareness of social justice issues by including carefully planned immersion experiences, which allowed students to experience a new culture without an ethnocentric lens and, as a result, experience cultural disorientation. This disorientation appeared to have caused individual transformation by compelling students to recognize and challenge their cultural paradigms and acquire new ones. Students were challenged to address their own cognitive beliefs and affective reactions that served to further their understanding of their prejudices and behaviors (Dickson et al., 2008).

Participants reported that the immersion experience and time spent outside the traditional classroom environment amplified the impact of their learning and allowed them to address attitudes that affect them personally. Furthermore, a number of students noted the discomfort of not being able to retreat into what was familiar, as they are able to do in the United States, and how this challenges personal frameworks about culture and helps develop cultural empathy. In addition to building awareness and insight into one's beliefs, students also spoke to the impact of the opportunity to build cross-cultural knowledge and skill while abroad. Service learning within an unfamiliar system offers students an augmented challenge to think about social justice perspectives not only within their own culture but also how various social systems of privilege and oppression affect individuals across the globe.

Participant feedback is consistent with transformative learning theory, and the findings of Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) offered a framework for how individuals' experiences create understanding and meaning of the world, including assumptions and expectations that influence their beliefs, values, thinking, and actions. International education and service learning offered students an opportunity to critically evaluate their existing frame of reference including cultural backgrounds and biases. Because it was used in conjunction with critical self-reflection, such experiences seemed to create a transformation of meaning where students were able to broaden their frame of reference, discard old ideas, and adapt new ways of thinking. Studying abroad appeared to be effective at creating these transformations as a result of disorienting dilemmas, which occurred when students were immersed in a culture different from their own and served as a catalyst for transformative learning.

Despite the reported effectiveness of cultural contact and experiential learning, this facet was also named by a majority of participants as one that they would like more of in terms of time and opportunity. This feedback is illustrated by participant comments such as, "Be there longer! I wish this course was an entire semester!" "Host stays! I think there is no better way to immerse oneself into a culture than spending time in a local person's home," "more time one-on-one/observing master (Singaporean) therapists when counseling," and "I appreciated the time with the Singaporean students, it could have been interesting to set up more opportunities to interact with them." The desire for more time and opportunity for experiential learning may reflect the effectiveness of such activities.

Participants expressed their desire for additional time abroad and also additional time once they arrived back home to debrief and begin to integrate their experiences and newly acquired knowledge and skill into their lives and work at home. One participant said,

It would be great to have one or two post-abroad class meetings. Those meetings could seek to review the experience and get more information on cultural groups residing in the local area. Providing resources for cultural services, events, and experiences back home could be really great as well. This would provide an opportunity to get a jump start on gaining multicultural knowledge relevant to local residents. Furthermore, it would give us that chance to integrate and apply the knowledge and skills we learned overseas to our work here at home.

Future Research

This pilot study examining the effects of the diversity course described above on the development of cultural competency and social justice values provides

preliminary support for the use of international education and service learning as a nontraditional, but effective, teaching method in promoting cultural competency and social justice in graduate psychology students. Further investigations into the effects of the diversity course in Singapore described above would benefit from a mixed-methods approach with a large sample. Qualitative data would provide rich, in-depth information, whereas quantitative measures would enhance the descriptions of results or the identification of salient themes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Quantitative measures might include the Intercultural Development Inventory, which is used to measure an individual's progression from a monocultural to a multicultural worldview (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003), or the Multicultural Counseling Self-Efficacy Scale–Racial Diversity Form, which is designed to assess professionals' perceived abilities in providing counseling to racially diverse clients (Sheu & Lent, 2007). Such measures could be used in conjunction with qualitative sources of data such as interviews, observations, videotapes of activities, and journals to produce a clearer understanding in an investigation. For these reasons, a mixed-methods study may offer the qualitative and quantitative components needed to gain further insight into the effects of studying abroad on the development of cultural competency and social justice values.

Implications and Training Recommendations

With the changing U.S. demographics and the lack of adequate mental health care for racial and ethnic populations and international populations residing in the United States, examining alternative, effective ways of training cultural competency and promoting social justice values is critical to counseling psychology. International education offers students an opportunity to experience how other cultures conceptualize and treat mental illness. Examples include the limits of using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) for diagnosing mental health disorders in other countries or a Singaporean instructor who shared the evocative notion that some therapists in the United States have their own indigenous healing methods, namely, Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT). These are examples of perspectives students can learn once they are outside the United States and exposed to perceptions that exist beyond their home culture. A practice recommendation based on this idea would include providing more opportunities, and funding, for students to study abroad with purposeful intercultural learning experiences, albeit this recommendation is easier to implement for those privileged enough to afford an international experience.

To bolster the impact of cross-cultural contact and immersion, service learning can be utilized as a vehicle for students to engage the local community in a meaningful way. Service learning initiatives have strong social justice implications in that students are immersed in different sociopolitical environments and subsequently asked to think critically about how systems and power dynamics affect individuals. Social justice's promotion of "equitable access to resources" challenges students to reflect deeply upon their own cultural assumptions, including advantages, privileges, and marginalization (Toporek et al., 2012, p. 305). Service learning both domestically and abroad offers students a unique experiential learning opportunity to address advocacy in a way that is culturally, developmentally, and issue appropriate.

Based on the work of Kim and Lyons (2003), an additional training recommendation would be to incorporate experiential activities in diversity courses, both domestically and abroad, in an effort to have students safely explore themselves, how it feels to operate within a set of rules, and practice strategies they may use with diverse clients. Such experiential learning techniques should be aimed at both the cognitive and affective learning domains that facilitate consciousness-raising activities (Dickson & Jepson, 2007). Working with diverse clients and interactions with supervisors who are members of ethnic and other diverse groups are examples of cultural contact experiential learning techniques that can help reduce prejudicial attitudes (Toporek & Reza, 2001).

Educational programs could make efforts to create disorienting dilemmas through carefully planned cultural immersion experiences (Kambutu & Nganga, 2008). Although this recommendation may be easier to implement while abroad, educational programs can create such experiences domestically. Disorienting dilemmas allow students to experience a new culture without an ethnocentric lens, resulting in disequilibrium. This dissonance, in turn, compels students to confront their own cultural paradigms, serves as a catalyst for self-reflection, and facilitates transformation and new learning. Engaging in critical self-reflection can broaden individuals' frame of reference, help them to discard old ideas, and encourage new ways of thinking (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011).

Conclusion

Our experience and preliminary data suggest that international education, with an embedded service learning component, is an effective experiential training method for promoting cultural competency and social justice values. We encourage educational and training programs to consider integrating experiential components, such as service learning and international education

into their curriculum. Admittedly, there are challenges to implementing such experiential activities into training and education. However, the field of counseling psychology demands, and is primed for, creativity and ingenuity in addressing repeated documentation of health disparities, reducing cultural biases in health care conceptualization and treatment, and enhancing cultural competency and social justice values in service of our clients and communities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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