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Preparing Culturally Competent Practitioners for a Global Society

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Abstract: The purpose of this mixed design research was to explore the cultural competency of adult education and counseling graduates in multicultural practice environments. While race/ethnicity, age, and experience influence cultural attitudes and competencies, effective graduate education, as well as mentoring and modeling by faculty, significantly improve cultural competency of new practitioners.

Ours is a global society. Regardless of the locale or region in which we work, how provincial or cosmopolitan, educators and counselors are increasingly called upon to serve diverse clientele. In order for education and social service intervention to be culturally sensitive, appropriate, and relevant, adult educators and counselors must not only be culturally competent, but need to understand their own cultural predispositions and assumptions. They must learn to be comfortable working with people who exhibit broad human differences – including age, race or ethnicity, religion, language, sexual orientation, abilities, physical characteristics, education, socio-economic status, and a myriad of other aspects of diversity. No standards currently exist for what it means to be culturally competent or how cultural competence might enhance the service capacity or proficiency of educators and counselors. Few curricular models can be found that explicitly seek to enhance practitioners' competence for work in the diverse environments in today's society. This research begins to address these issues.

Theoretical Framework and Review of Relevant Literature

As previously noted, there are no standards for determining what it actually means to be culturally competent. Research on the topic has focused mainly on measures of cultural competence, cultural competence models, and examinations of culturally competent practice in a variety of settings. In order to most effectively review research on cultural competence, it is first important to define the topic.

Cultural competence was defined by Schim, Doorenbos, and Borse (2006) as “the demonstration of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors based on diverse, relevant cultural experiences. It is the incorporation of personal cultural diversity experience, awareness, and sensitivity into practice” (p. 303). Those behaviors, they believe, are “based on personal exposure, experience with people from diverse groups, and awareness of individual and group similarities and differences” (p. 303). Campinha-Bacote (2003) defined cultural competence from the standpoint of a practitioner/client or instructor/student, which is important in this study. Her definition of cultural competence is “the process in which the [practitioner] continuously strives to achieve the ability and availability to effectively work within the cultural context of a client” (Paragraph 3).

Self-awareness and cultural knowledge of others are recurring themes in many discussions of cultural competence. Carter, for instance, suggested that “advocates of cross cultural competence emphasize the need to understand one's own worldview” (2003, p. 20). Other researchers have concluded that the development of cultural competence goes beyond self-awareness to include the “influence of culture on the client, as well as the influence of historical

relationships between the client and the counselor's respective racial/cultural groups" (Ametrano, Callaway, & Stickle, 2001, p. 3). And, in his research on cultural competence of health care providers, McCabe similarly noted that "in order to provide culturally competent patient care, health care providers must try to understand their patients' beliefs" (2003, p. 458).

These interpretations of cultural competence have led to the development of various models of cultural competence. Carter's Racial-Cultural Competency Counseling model "focuses on the concept of the person as a counselor" (2003, p. 20). With the goal of developing students' skills and reflective abilities, Divac and Heaphy's model of cultural competence training in the workplace includes "experiential space where the scrutiny of trainees' culturally determined beliefs, values, and attitudes is facilitated" (2005, p. 281). Purnell's (2002) model of cultural competence consists of both macro and micro aspects of culture, beginning with macro aspects such as global society and community, and moving toward micro aspects such as family and person. The macro and micro aspects of Purnell's model work together in varying ways to influence 12 domains such as family roles, communication, workforce issues, nutrition, spirituality, and health care practices.

Campinha-Bacote (2003) proposed a model of cultural competence that starts with one's desire to become culturally competent, includes self awareness of one's own biases and prejudices, and continues with seeking knowledge about diverse cultural and ethnic groups. The final phase of the model results in cultural skill through incorporation of cultural knowledge into practice. This is similar to Papadopolous and Lees' (2002) model of cultural competence, which consists of four concepts: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence. Although Papadopolous and Lees define cultural competence in broader terms, their model includes two layers of cultural competence – one, "culture generic (knowledge and skills that are applicable across ethnic groups), and culture-specific competence (knowledge and skills that are related to a particular ethnic group)" (p. 258).

As evidenced in this review, numerous cultural scholars have hypothesized that cultural competence education and training should be included in the pre-professional preparation of educators and social service practitioners; others espouse that such education can improve cultural competence in actual practice. Koskinen and Tossavainen (2003), for instance, concluded that the primary benefits of teaching cultural competence to students included personal maturation, professional growth, and intellectual development. It is important, therefore, that practitioners in the fields of adult education and counseling understand the critical nature of cultural competence in today's global society.

Research Design

This project utilized a mixed research design which supported the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The research was conducted during the summer and fall academic terms in 2006 with graduate adult education, counseling, and psychology students in a mid-sized university in the south eastern United States of America.

Data Collection

Data collection included a self-reported 25-item survey, follow-up intensive individual interviews, and student focus groups. Students who participated (N=82, 77% female and 23% male, ages 24-62) were enrolled in one of 5 graduate classes in the summer and/or fall of 2006. The courses were Multicultural Issues in Education (two sections), Social/Cultural Issues in Counseling, Educational Gerontology, and Adult Learning and Development.

The survey solicited demographic information and assessed students' cultural attitudes and experiences, comfort in working in diverse learning and social service environments, and perceived barriers to the development of their cultural competence. Follow-up, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students (70% female, 30% male). These interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each, were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Thirty-six female students then participated in one of 3 hour-long focus groups that provided both corroborating and clarifying data to those gathered in the survey and individual interviews and allowed the researcher to debrief with the student participants to answer any questions or concerns about the project.

Data Analysis

Nominal and categorical survey data were analyzed using SPSS software and summarized in descriptive form in narrative report. Qualitative data were analyzed according to constant comparative analysis methods beginning immediately after the first interview and continuing throughout the three focus groups. Concurrent collection, categorization, and synthesis of data continued throughout the research process until a point of saturation was reached with no new themes or subcategories emerging, and all data fit well into existing categories (Patton, 2002).

Findings and Discussion

In addition to the self-reported demographics, the research findings include: (a) aggregated, narrative report of students' attitudes and comfort in working with diverse individuals; (b) a brief overview of experiences and barriers that students perceived as inhibiting the development of cultural competence; (c) students' reports of instructional strategies and mentoring that facilitated growth in cultural competence.

Participant Demographics

The 82 graduate students who participated (77% female and 23% male, ages 24-62 with a mean age of 32), were primarily Caucasian; 18% were African American, 5% Native American, and 2% Hispanic. The majority of students reported being from low- to middle-class families. Twelve of the participants were international students from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. A narrow majority reported holding primarily Christian beliefs, while 22% identified themselves as Jewish (4%), Muslim (8%), or "non-religious" (10%). Two persons self-identified as having some disability; 3 reported being either lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Nearly 30% of the participants were fluent in a language other than English.

Cultural Attitudes and Comfort Level

Although the survey data showed the majority of students held either "very positive" or "positive" attitudes towards persons who were somehow different than they, interview and focus group data revealed slightly less favorable attitudes and comfort levels when dealing directly with persons from different cultural groups. In particular, differences in areas of religion and sexual orientation were found to be especially problematic for some students. One counseling student shared that she would feel "compelled to share my own religious beliefs if I see that it might help fix the problem my client is having." This comment prompted a shared, in-depth discussion in a later focus group about professional guidelines and ethical implications for such convictions. Two other students shared what they assumed would be a "serious problem if [we]

knew someone we were teaching or working with was gay; I'm not sure how I would handle that."

Inhibiting Experiences and Barriers

Generally, the students agreed that four factors in particular – earlier life experiences, religious training, education, and peer groups – were significant influences on their cultural attitudes, comfort and competency with persons of different cultures. As one student shared:

I wasn't raised in a very tolerant family. My family wasn't mean or anything to anybody, but my father and brothers sure thought there were right and wrong ways to be; I guess I've been influenced by that.

This prompted another student to comment that he had come to realize that his "religious upbringing, my church, has taught me some very narrow views about people – who's good, who's bad just because they're different. That's probably why I don't go [to church] anymore." Other students mentioned attending small rural schools or private/religious educational institutions, both of which failed to provide opportunities for learning about or interacting with students of other cultures. And, finally, the discussion of peer influence seemed to raise a new awareness of how strongly attitudes and behaviors are shaped by one's peer group.

Facilitative Instructional Strategies and Instructor Mentoring

Among the more salient and informing data were the students' reports of the instructional strategies, activities, and other opportunities that they felt had not only taught them in "very real, applied ways about diversity" but helped them build awareness and competence in diverse settings. Every student had multiple opportunities and was encouraged to participate in a variety of workshops, conferences, or other cultural events during the research; they were then prompted to reflect on and dialogue about these experiences with others in their classes and focus groups. These opportunities included nationally recognized speakers whose presentations focused on various cultural topics, community diversity festivals, and local or regional conferences during which sessions focused on issues of diversity. Students found that, in addition to the information gained from such events, the discussion groups, forums, and reflections that followed helped them "understand even more about how important knowing about diversity is, how hard it will be for me to work in [a diverse location] if I don't change some of my thinking." In the later months of data collection, a significant number of students from all five classes began to seek out additional cultural opportunities, attending in small groups and independently meeting to dialogue and reflect on their learning.

About one-third of the students had completed internships, practica, or service learning projects during the course of the research – each of these in settings that provided the opportunity to work with different cultures. In all cases, students were supported via onsite or frequent visits or consultation by supervising faculty in these applied learning opportunities. Students consistently commented on the comfort in having supervisors or faculty readily available, in "knowing that my professor wasn't too far away in case I got in trouble with someone who was different than me." Similarly, students participating in internships, practica, or service learning recognized the value in actual supervised experience with persons who were of different cultures. As one student noted, "when I get out there on my own, I'll already have more knowledge, and some idea about how to help folks who are not like me."

One of the final critical findings was the recognition by the students of the importance that faculty played in providing feedback, mentoring, and modeling of culturally sensitive behavior. Students expressed feeling "supported ... more aware of how I should be as a

counselor ... better able to teach appreciation of difference by seeing it modeled for me.” As one student summarized:

seeing how my professor dealt with someone she didn't agree with, wasn't like, couldn't identify with – but still work with them effectively – showed me how I'm different than I used to be. I've learned tolerance isn't enough; I can't just be not mean to people who are different, I have to help promote diversity in my work. By watching her, I know what means to be culturally competent and I can keep working to get there.

In conclusion, the following summarize the major findings of this mixed design research on preparing culturally competent practitioners for our increasingly global society.

1. Students' race/ethnicity, age, and experience significantly influence cultural attitudes, comfort, and competency.
2. Workshops, conferences, and other cultural activities increase both comfort and competence, as do facilitated opportunities such as student discussion groups, forums, and reflection.
3. Internships, practica, and service learning opportunities provide helpful hands-on learning; active supervision and frequent visits/consultations by faculty are important, especially in new or less familiar environments.
4. Feedback, mentoring, and modeling by faculty positively affect students' willingness and ability to effectively practice in multicultural environments.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Research such as this holds practical and theoretical significance for adult and counseling education. The research is equally important, however, for the participants themselves and for the learners, clients, and agencies they serve. The more culturally sensitive, competent, and comfortable in diverse environments our graduates are, the more culturally informed and relevant will be the education, career development, intervention, counseling, and social support services they offer. The research also enhances the development of improved models of in-service and continuing professional education. Further, this and other cultural research facilitates a fuller understanding of the underlying assumptions and foundations on which graduate education is based, thus allowing for a more critical and reflective perspective on this area of professional practice.

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