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Small steps and long strides: Personal reflections and insights on becoming multiculturally competent

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Small Steps and Long Strides: Personal Reflections and Insights on becoming
Multiculturally Competent

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JAMES MADISON UNIVESRITY

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program at James Madison University. A program that has taught me how to flourish, endure and excel.

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This Project would not have been possible without the help of so many people in so many ways. I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Renee Staton, whose encouragement and enduring support has constantly driven me to excel. I could not have completed this project without her.

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Abstract

With a history of attention being paid to multicultural counseling competencies as important attributes for a counselor to have to work with diverse clients, new counselors are challenged to prepare for working with these clients. Lee (2006) found that multiculturally competent professionals possess the awareness, knowledge, and skills to work with diverse communities. New counselors need to develop the knowledge, skills and awareness to competently work with diverse clients. There are multiple training methods suggested to support the development of these counseling competencies including Contact Hypothesis, cross-cultural interaction and cultural immersion. This article focuses on one graduate student's background and recent strides to incorporate these training methods as a way to become multiculturally competent. The article follows how the student uses her background and recent cross-cultural experiences to inform her of her knowledge, skills and awareness of working with diverse communities. The author then concludes with her integrating current research with her experiences to provide insights about the process of becoming multiculturally competent. The author outlines practical suggestions for future research in the area of becoming multiculturally competent.

Introduction

I stood in the Paris Nord train station, exhausted from our early morning commute and in awe of the elegant mix of generations of architecture. There was no doubt I was in Paris, France. However, the excitement I felt, in spite of my nerves, was not shared by my travel mate, Jaimie. Because we would leave Paris in a few days, my travel mate and I needed to get our next train tickets endorsed, so I used my broken French to ask for assistance. Although the line was long, my excitement was not dulled; Jaimie, my companion, was becoming frustrated.

“The gypsies are annoying and stupid. The Middle-Eastern men in front of us stink. The line is too long; there should be more people at work. These French are so lazy.”

By the time we arrived at the front of the line, my companion’s observations greatly irritated me. I tried to be open-minded, attempting to absorb all that I could out of my surroundings; however, I found this incredibly difficult with my companion’s constant stereotyping. I felt a bubble of excitement and nervousness as I stepped forward to the counter, where my first real conversation with a French native would occur. Yet, before I could even get one word out, Jaimie stepped in front of me to complain to the attendant in English. She became more upset and began to raise her voice, attempting to explain that we needed our tickets validated. Embarrassment flushed over my face as I stepped up to quickly try some cultural damage control, but before I could get an apology out of my mouth, I saw the young man talking to his manager. The manager began insulting us in French.

“Stupid Americans, they are so disorganized with their silly passports. Do they even make nice Americans?!? They never know what they are doing!”

I felt caught between my rude travel mate and this rude attendant. I was not the person they were describing as disorganized and silly. I had been practicing my phrases and how to ask politely where to go. Sadness filled me; I was shaken to realize how quickly one could be stereotyped. I felt judged and defined, recognizing that what Jaimie had been doing was now happening to me. It was then that all of the American stereotypes came rushing into my head: fat, lazy, inconsiderate, pushy, and self-centered, none of which I believe describe me. In that moment, I realized that both the people were stereotyping each other. I finished our business with the attendant as quickly and politely as I could, but on our way out, Jaimie could not contain herself and began complaining about how rude the French train attendant was.

At that moment, I knew I could choose to tell Jaimie what the attendant had said about us in French, thereby confirming Jaimie’s stereotypes of rude French people, or I could keep them to myself to keep the peace. I have spent a significant amount of my education learning about and how to respect other cultures, but I felt so wronged that I told Jaimie what was said. Together we shared feelings of being frustrated, but I did not feel any better after reassuring her suspicions. This encounter encouraged me to think about cross-cultural encounters and how they affect with the counseling skills I have learned at James Madison. I immediately began to wonder how my counseling skills could have made this situation different. I have had many positive and negative cross cultural encounters since my counseling training began that sparked my interest in how cross cultural encounters inform multicultural counseling practices.

Personal Journey

I am in my third and final year of my Clinical Mental Health Counseling graduate program. I spent my youth growing up in a diverse, urban, lower socioeconomic status neighborhood. In high school as a Caucasian female, I was a minority. When I entered higher education, I found myself baffled by what it meant to be a Caucasian female at a large college in a rural town where I represented the majority. By the second week of school, it was obvious that my perceptions of myself were quite different than what was expected of me by others. This was a shock, but as I shared these thoughts, feelings, and experiences with my fellow first years I got a different response.

This was the first time in my life where everyone in my friend group was the same ethnicity as I. I found out that this experience was the norm to my new friends. In their previous school experience, they were the majority, and the cultural expectations were not different for them in their transition to higher education. This puzzled me completely. As a young Caucasian female, I was expected to wear certain clothes, act specific ways and to be a person that I am not. I did not have expensive purses or go on expensive vacations. I had no intention of finding a husband while in college and found my studies more interesting than going to parties. Yet, this is what was expected of me by my peers and by my educators. All I knew of my culture and of others' cultures was spinning. I spent much of my first few years of college trying to grasp the idea of how culture varies among people and how it changes with one's experiences.

This rich experience intrigued me in many ways. I dove into classes that concentrated on culture, gender, sexuality, and religion because these were the things

that, I felt at the time, made people unique. The summer before my last year of my undergraduate degree, I had the opportunity to study abroad in Italy. The experiences and encounters I had there were stereotype-bending. I met many people who defied their stereotypes. I walked away from that experience knowing that my views on people and culture had shifted significantly. That experience is still one that I find meaningful. It was then that I knew that culture and understanding human interactions would be a life-long shifting journey for me.

As I entered graduate school in Clinical Mental Health Counseling, this cross-cultural interest morphed again. I became interested in how a counselor can be multiculturally competent with the variety of cultures not only in our country, but all of the countries in the world. Many of my counseling classes addressed this concern, and it became evident that this is a skill that takes attention, time and experience. After having so many profound cultural experiences, I realized that I could not learn cultural competence from just reading a book. I am currently working at my college counseling center for my internship and have worked with many students from a variety of different backgrounds. I have learned from their experiences and my experiences with them. I also realize that my previous cross-cultural experiences have taught me many things that I have used and brought into the counseling room. It is this realization that inspired this paper. Before writing this paper, I immersed myself once more in a month long trip to parts of Western and Eastern Europe to have an immersion experience while I was studying to become a counselor. My goal is to impart some of the awareness, knowledge and skills I have attained through my different cross-cultural encounters and experiences.

Background

In the 1992 article, *Multicultural Counseling Competencies and Standards: A Call to the Profession*, Sue, Arrendondo, and McDavis responded to a document approved by the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) outlining a need and rationale for a multicultural perspective in counseling. The diversification of the United States and the sociopolitical reality of counseling highlight the need to create culturally competent counselors. Although as humans we are all racial, ethnic and cultural beings belonging to different groups, we do not necessarily have the competencies and skills necessary to be culturally skilled counselors. Multiculturally competent professionals possess the knowledge, awareness and skills to work with diverse communities and implement techniques and strategies that are consistent with the life experience and cultural values of their clients (Lee, 2006). Now well recognized in literature, a fundamental quality of an effective counselor is the ability to empathize with the experiences of a client, despite potential cultural differences (Anderson & Cranston-Gingras, 1991; Canfield, 1992; Sue, 1991).

Although the “Call to the Profession” article is over twenty years old, multicultural competency is still a widely discussed issue. The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development is still a strong division within the American Counseling Association and strives to promote multiculturally competent counseling through greater awareness and understanding of multiculturalism (Butler, 2012). The division also concentrates on the impact of cultural and ethnic difference amongst the members of the counseling profession. In addition, the Commission on Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) asserts the need for counselor

competency in working with culturally varied clients (CACREP, 2009). CACREP stipulates that multicultural competency training be integrated into counselor education curricula to reflect the significant amount of research that affirms the importance of multicultural competencies for counselors. Multicultural learning has become integral to the overall definition of counseling. Multicultural competence is a topic that has recently received an increase in empirical and theoretical attention (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992).

Definitions

Before going further, I would like to provide some important definitions. As discussed previously, multiculturally competent professionals possess the awareness, knowledge, and skills to work with diverse communities. These professionals can implement practices that are consistent with the cultural values of their clients (Lee, 2006). This being said, any study that is aiming to discuss multicultural competencies concerning counselors will emphasize awareness, knowledge, and skills.

Helms and Richardson define *awareness* as “the process of examining the content and validity of personal and societal attitudes, opinions, and assumptions about societal, racial, and cultural groups” (1997, p. 75). Lee, in agreement, states that awareness is an integral step toward becoming a multiculturally competent counselor (2006). Awareness is also vital when using a specific tool such as cross-cultural immersion or cross-cultural encounters as a tool to become competent.

Knowledge is essential for counselors who are multiculturally competent. Learning about diverse cultural groups is essential to the development of a holistic

knowledge about human behavior across cultures, which then is essential for effective counseling (Heppner, 2006). In the discussion of cross-cultural immersion and encounters, gaining knowledge from the cultures that a person is experiencing provides a better understanding of that culture, as well as a more complete and holistic view of the culture.

The third component in the list that a multiculturally competent counselor should possess is *skills*. Sue et al. (1992) defines a culturally skilled counselor as a person who is consistently in the process of evolving and practicing relevant, appropriate and sensitive interventions and skills working with their culturally different client (p. 481). Thus, it can be argued that multicultural skill development contains an understanding of the cultural context, as well as what interventions and behaviors are appropriate in that cultural context.

Since beginning my training as a mental health counselor, I have noticed the field's emphasis on becoming multiculturally competent, as well as the lack of specific direction on how to become competent. Many articles describe a lack of research in a defined track of work to gain these skills, awareness and knowledge. Contact, immersion and cross cultural contact have all been discussed in cross-cultural research as proposed ways to become multiculturally competent.

Contact Hypothesis

There have been many theories developed to suggest how counselors can become multiculturally competent. Contact hypothesis has been described as one of the primary ways to improve understanding in encounters such as the relationship between a client

and counselor. Gordon Allport is often credited with the proposition of the Contact Hypothesis (1954). The hypothesis states that people who communicate with others are better able to understand and appreciate differing points of view (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). As a result of this new appreciation and understanding, it is thought that prejudice will diminish (Whitley & Kite, 2010). Allport proposed that properly managed contact can reduce issues such as stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. In order for this to occur, four criteria must be present: equal status; common goals; acquaintance potential; and the support of authorities, and law and customs (1954).

According to Allport, when these four come together, different groups have the potential to learn from each other. The criterion of “*equal status*” refers to the ranking in the relationship. Both members must have equal standing within the relationship to be able to accomplish their goals. This needs to occur even when equal status is not present in the greater surrounding culture. These groups must work on a problem and share the same “*common goal*.” “*Acquaintance potential*” refers to the fact that these two groups will work together without competition. Finally, the criterion that states the need for “*support of authorities, laws and customs*” refers to a support from some authority that both groups acknowledge and define social norms that support the contact between the two groups. For example, many students from all over the world come to the United States for a college education. The laws in the United States allow for these students to do this. This is placing them in a situation where the international students and U.S. students have the support of the authorities, laws and customs of the United States to allow the two parties to learn from one another through contact. This support must approve of the contact and interactions between the groups. Once these four criteria are

met, the two groups have a great potential to learn from one another. Without these, the groups will have much less potential because the groups will not be on the same playing field. It is proposed in many counseling programs that when these four criteria align in a cross cultural experience, a counselor could gain valuable knowledge about other cultures and themselves within other cultures. Allport never stated how long or involved this contact would have to be for the two parties to gain the most insight from the contact. So contact could refer to having a conversation with a person in the lunch line or spending a more extended time with a person. Another unknown about this hypothesis is whether these interactions have to be natural. Whereas some of the parameters of the contact are defined not all are discussed. This leaves room for further research.

There has been further research concerning the Contact Hypothesis in a variety of ways. One of the most significant advances in this hypothesis is the growing evidence of indirect intergroup contact strategies as a way to improve relations between differing social groups (Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011). For instance, Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp found that knowing that a member of one's group has a close relationship with a member of an out group can lead to more positive attitudes towards that other group (1997). Although to experience this is not first hand exposure to the culture, it allows the person a representative of that culture. Since counselors are exposed to a variety of people both professionally and personally, this hypothesis proposes that the more people a counselor interacts with, the more likely the counselor will be open-minded when meeting new people. Exposure to new experiences and cultures would strengthen a counselor's multicultural competencies working with clients. There are still some unknowns about Contact Hypothesis.

Cultural Immersion

Counselors in the United States work in an increasingly diverse society; regardless of their own cultural identity they need to possess competencies for working effectively with culturally different clients. To support this view, counselor cultural sensitivity is particularly essential when the counselor is a member of the majority cultural group and the client is a member of the minority cultural group (Sabnani, Ponterotto, & Borodovsky, 1991). Since the early 1990's, there have been many different approaches that use the Contact Hypothesis in ways to develop these multicultural skills. Research explains that education abroad is a powerful influence on students' attitudes, intercultural skills, views on education and learning within their discipline (Dwyer, 2004; Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004; Vande Berg, Balkcum, Scheid, & Whalen, 2004). Similarly, cultural immersion is a proposed method to promote self awareness, reduce bias, and develop multicultural skills for counseling students (Alexander, Kruczek & Ponterotto, 2005; Ishii, Gilbride, & Stensrud, 2009). Pope-Davis et al. described cultural immersion projects as experiences that require students to engage in activities with a cultural community that is different from their own (1997). These immersions are based on the Contact Hypothesis, which holds that significant, sustained, and direct contact between divergent social groups reduces tensions and misunderstandings (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005). Research stresses that effective cultural immersion experiences occur over an extended period of time (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Ishii et al., 2009; Pope-Davis et al., 1997). Alexander et al. (2005), Arthur and Achenbach (2002), DeRicco and Sciarra (2005), and Pope-Davis et al. (1997) recommended that a series of reflections of this immersion experience prior to, during, and at the conclusion of their experience are

essential to the process of becoming more culturally competent. For counselors, cultural immersion offers a variety of experiences within other cultures that could accelerate their cross-cultural competencies. In certain cases immersion uses the same principles of cultural contact, but offers a more intense experience in cultures.

Cross-Cultural Interaction

Whereas, cross cultural immersion refers to a person with a deep involvement in a culture; cross-cultural interaction is a broader term that encapsulates all ranges of cross-cultural interaction. Cross-cultural interaction differs from other interactions by allowing a person to participate in a culture that they do not normally reside in. Similar to cultural immersions, cross-cultural interaction has been used as a method to help counseling students not only interact with other cultural groups, but as a mechanism to open their experiences beyond their norm. Cross-cultural interaction also uses the same principles of Contact Hypothesis to explain why these interactions are so beneficial to counselors.

However, the research on the development of cross cultural counseling competencies has somewhat neglected the relevance of cross-cultural interaction (Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001). Studies focusing on multicultural competencies primarily focused on validating the four main instruments that have been built for measuring the construct and correlating these instruments with educational variables and demographics (LaFromboise et al. 1991; Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994; Pope-Davis, Reynolds, Dings, & Nielson, 1995).

Although cross-cultural interaction has not been a popular research area, there have been some significant connections made to cross cultural competencies. Mio studied

the effects of cross-cultural interaction within a multicultural counseling course (1989). Students were divided up into two different lengths of contact experiences: in one, students were observing a group (e.g. attending a cultural event) and in the other students completed a semester-long, one-on-one relationship with an international student. At the end of both experiences all students were required to write papers on the experience. These papers were then rated by two independent judges, who found that the students who participated in the one-on-one exchange had a much richer experience than the students who observed a group. Mio (1989) concluded, "Actual one-to-one exchange of ideas with an individual can greatly enhance one's experience with members of another cultural group above and beyond factual knowledge about the group" (p. 43). This study found further that if prejudice is to be decreased by cross-cultural contact, one short-time experience is not an effective way to achieve this effect.

Heppner and O' Brien (1994) and Neville et al. (1996) each gathered qualitative data on positive and negative events and their effects on students in a multicultural counseling course. Students were asked what components of the course aided them in understanding their competencies and what assisted them in progressing toward cross-cultural competency goals. Both studies found that guest speakers from different cultural backgrounds were consistently the most important course component in helping students achieve their desired changes. These findings strongly suggest that cross-cultural interaction within one's own culture can also help a counselor in becoming more culturally competent. The students found that being exposed and having the ability to interact in a non-judgmental atmosphere with people from different cultures helped them achieve their desired cross-cultural changes. Using any of these strategies to accelerate a

counselor's cross-cultural competencies allows the counselor to become more skilled in counseling clients that are culturally different from them.

Personal Insights and Recommendations

Knowing that in the past I learned a great deal from cross-cultural encounters and experiences, I spent a month last summer backpacking around Western and Eastern Europe, absorbing the culture and its people. Taking this trip and my varied experiences in my rural college town into account, using a critical eye to analyze the encounters, I have a better understanding of how such encounters inform my cross-cultural practices. I experienced both immersion events and cross-cultural contact multiple times. Using a critical eye during and after the encounters allowed me to better understand the situations and how they affected me as a counselor. Since multiculturally competent professionals possess the knowledge, awareness and skills to work with diverse communities the following recommendations and insights concentrate on these three attributes that can be gained through cross-cultural experiences (Lee, 2006).

The Complexity of Stereotypes

My cross-cultural encounters taught me first hand lessons that apply both in the counseling room and outside. The complexity of stereotypes was a lesson I encountered while immersed abroad. Stereotypes standardize and simplify commonly held beliefs about individuals or social groups. While these are prevalent in society today, through my training I have become more aware of what role they play in counseling. The more training I received in multicultural counseling, the more I questioned stereotypes. However, when I was immersed in another culture, I found myself reverting to stereotypes even when I consciously tried to overcome them. Stereotypes do not exist in a vacuum. They rather accompany all of the pressures of foreign travel. I found it easy to

fall back on them when my mind was occupied with where I was, what I was going, what I wanted to do, and the pressures of dealing with my travel mate. Being open-minded and avoiding stereotypes is an active process requiring additional effort to overcome even minor prejudice. With the variety of new pressures I dealt with abroad, I didn't consciously realize that I was stereotyping.

For instance, I often felt hesitant about approaching anyone except a Caucasian female when I felt lost looking for directions. I felt too vulnerable to approach someone with any other racial background or gender because, as a young Caucasian female, that felt more dangerous to me. Consciously, I know stereotyping in this way is unfairly classifying people. Yet, I found that some of these stereotypes were hardwired into my system. Allport (1954) stated that stereotyping is a commonly occurring issue among rival or different groups. The aforementioned four criteria of equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation and support from the authorities would need to be met in this situation for prejudice and stereotyping to diminish. It took critical attention and focused thought to override these thoughts and actions. I was astounded by the confusion I felt within myself. I know as a counselor, I don't want to rely on stereotypes and alienate my clients. After many such experiences, it became obvious that stereotypes were complicated to understand, hard to identify and at times hidden from myself. I learned that the best way for me to deal with them is to not underestimate their power and to always be aware of the fact that they could be present. Alexander et al. (2005), Arthur and Achenbach (2002), DeRicco and Sciarra (2005), would suggest that I have processed my experiences while I was immersed. They found that being able to work through feelings while still in the culture would help an individual to gain a stronger knowledge

of his or her feelings. Having that space to thoroughly evaluate and understand my experiences would have allowed me to expand my thought process. Although I only processed with myself sometimes, without any processing cultural immersion can reinforce stereotypes (Alexander et al., 2005).

In the counseling room, I am more mindful of what stereotypes I may be relying on because I have realized how hidden they can be. I am more willing now to process with either peers or supervisors situations that felt less aligned with my beliefs and theories as a counselor. I know that this inconsistency can be common. Since counselors use themselves as tools, it is imperative for the counselor to understand their emotions and preconceived notions about others because these emotions may become present in the counseling room. Placing themselves in these cross-cultural experiences allows them to understand their own stereotypes in a non-counseling setting. Also, acknowledging that I will make mistakes and not be as culturally sensitive as I feel I should be made me feel more open to discuss these situations. Taking these situations as learning opportunities allows me to continue learning throughout my career both inside and outside the counseling room.

Discomfort and Ambiguity

When first learning the skill of counseling, there is an overwhelming sense of ambiguity and discomfort. This sense is similar to having a cross-cultural experience. There is uncertainty around how the interaction will go or what emotions will be struck. When approaching a counseling session we are taught to be open-minded and patient. I learned that these are great skills to have when trying to absorb and experience a cross-

cultural interaction. There is so much to absorb that having barriers up, such as stereotypes or preconceived notions that hinder a full view of the culture at hand, can rob the observer of a true view of the culture.

On the first day of my three week European trip, we stepped off our plane at London Heathrow airport. Of all of the countries we were to visit, I expected to feel the least discomfort in London. Since we spoke the same language and out of all of the countries we were visiting, it was the one I knew most about. I was not ready to bump into people the whole way to the tube and then to be smashed into an hour train ride to the city. I remember distinctly bumping into a person and quickly apologizing. The lady didn't lose her stride or respond to me. I was immediately puzzled, but then it kept happening with other people. I found this very uncomfortable and rude. While on the train ride I was also bewildered to see that no one was talking. I was confused and felt very out of place talking softly with my friend. So many people loved this city, but all I encountered by whole first day were people that I would consider rude. I remember lying down to sleep that night feeling very uncomfortable with the idea of facing the city the next day and the overwhelming feeling that I didn't belong in this kind of city.

From these moments a counselor can work on their skills, knowledge and awareness of cross-cultural factors. It was the ambiguity of cultural customs and the discomfort of being in a completely different place that showed me how differently people can be. Once I was in this ambiguous situation there was much discomfort for me. My friend who lived in London previously adapted well, but I made snap judgments. Immersion experiences can aid in increasing a person's awareness of themselves, as well as, develop competencies in other domains (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). Since every

person reacts differently to ambiguity and discomfort, having these experiences allowed me to better understand how I react to ambiguity. Also, as a person experiences different cultures, one becomes more skilled at working with difference. This skill aids in the person feeling more aware of cultural competencies (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002).

Similarly, in counseling with a client that is from another culture, whether it is a client of a different race, religion, sexuality or any other affiliation, there is a chance there will be some discomfort and ambiguity. In these moments self-awareness is important to create an understanding and empathetic space for the client no matter the counselors discomfort. Viewing this counseling relationship as an encounter and using those moments to be transparent about the counseling relationship with the client is also a great use of the counselor's self-awareness.

Discussion of Expectations

I have been lucky enough to have met and learned from many international people in my own rural college town. I have felt safer exploring cross cultural experiences with them than I have when I am immersed in another culture. This feeling of safety led me to some interesting conversations about different views of counseling. I had one of the most memorable conversations with a lady of German decent. She went to university in Paris and England and now works at my university. The conversation began with her asking why I would ever go into counseling. I explained my passion and motivation to use talk therapy with people, and her response was surprising to me. She was surprised by how many people need counseling and that there was not a more scientific way of going about solving personal problems. She thought that there was no scientific evidence for counseling and was resistant to the idea of people spending an hour a week talking with a

professional. She mentioned multiple times that in Germany, this would be the common opinion. In 2009 Angermeyer, Holzinger and Matschinger found that even with many anti-stigma campaigns in Germany educating people about mental disorders, the public felt a lack of desire to decrease the social distance between themselves and people with mental health issues. Now, being in this field, I am more aware that the relationship between the client and counselor has a positive effect on the client (Kahn, 1997). This conversation stuck inside of me to a reminder to always discuss expectations and hesitations of counseling no matter the cultural background. This difference in culture reveals a striking difference between our expectations of counseling. A client may have a cultural hesitancy to talking to another person about certain sensitive subjects. Knowing the client's hesitancies allows the counselor not only a glimpse into these notions; it gives the counselor a better understanding of how the client might interact in session. The hesitancy may play out in many ways, and knowing that there is hesitancy allows for an easier transition to that conversation.

Intention vs. Impact

One of the differences I noticed between my friend and me was how intentional we were to immerse ourselves in the cultures we visited. I wanted to experience as much of the culture as I could and Jaimie would have preferred to monitor her interactions and experiences. This difference in intention led to a difference in the impact the culture had on us. How to act politely in a different culture was one disagreement Jaimie and I had. She took the philosophy that she would not treat people differently in other countries than she did in the United States. I found this puzzling because she was not in the United States and customs were different. What seems polite in the United States may in fact be

rude in another culture. She was under the assumption that if she had good intentions, they would come across. She also felt the need to not change her behaviors because being true to her identity mattered more than being polite.

This idea of true identity and conformity to other cultures really intrigued me. While abroad, participating in other cultures, I did not feel that I lost any part of my cultural identity by trying to participate in other cultures under their cultural rules. I actually found myself enamored by other cultures to the point of understanding my feelings about culture and traditions better. I also found that my ability to withstand ambiguity strengthened by allowing myself to be immersed in the fullness of another culture. Once I could tolerate the ambiguity better, I became more comfortable taking risks and perhaps making mistakes.

I did find that there was something to gain from this immersion concerning true identity. I found that my identity is impressionable. My identity has been affected by each cross-cultural experience I have had. This fits with past experiences, but being able to process with myself and my companion about my thoughts, feelings, and actions, I felt this process more actively. When I shared my theory on this with my travel mate, I found much resistance. I pondered deeply about how intentions played into this experience. This was another opportunity for me to grow as a counselor as well as a person. I was pushing my opinions about culture onto my companion just as much as she was to me. Culture is a sensitive and powerful force in life. It is important to respect people's differences in opinion concerning how they view their involvement in culture. Differing levels of involvement alter the amount of impact the culture can have on the person.

Pedersen (2002) states that contact with differing cultures provide individuals with opportunities to rehearse adaptive functioning skills that help them survive in the diversified world. Choosing the level of involvement in the culture will be different for every person. It allows them to choose how much these experiences affect them, as well as, allows them to rehearse and gain these skills. Similarly, It is important for a counselor to consistently be aware of his or her level of involvement and his or her clients' level in the therapy room. This awareness allows the counselor to better understand how open a client is to new experiences and how they might participate in counseling. Respecting this level allows the client to feel accepted and potentially more comfortable with the ambiguity; thus, encouraging the client to adapt, tolerate and perhaps strive for a deeper level of involvement.

Counseling as a Culture

The most significant insight I drew through critically analyzing my cross-cultural encounters is that counseling itself is a culture. This idea slipped into my mind while I was chatting with two English blokes on a sleeper train to Paris. We were getting to know each other and I was explaining my graduate school experience in counseling when one interrupted me, pronouncing,

“I just don't get it, really. You listen to people all day about their problems and you don't get angry or sad or tired of it? You are a breed on to your own.”

I laughed at this and agreed that it takes a different sort of person to enjoy this nature of working with people. He could not imagine being a counselor or understanding what about counseling would draw a person to this field. Counseling and therapy are a

culture. Counseling is stereotyped by media to appear a certain way. There is a distinct procedure to counseling, and with time it can be understood. At first, this process is ambiguous and perhaps unnerving for new clients. Understanding counseling from this view allows counselors to understand that clients coming in for services will be stepping into a culture they may know little about. They will encounter many of the same issues I shared while in other cultures myself. Both the counselor and the client are experiencing another culture that they are adjusting.

I have had many cross cultural experiences both in my town and far away. I loved visiting other places and being immersed in a new culture, but there are cultures overlapping each other in every town in America. There is always an opportunity to consider one's counseling skills. What made all of my experiences so rich is the fact that I was engaged both as a counselor and a person who was not familiar with that culture. Actively engaging in all of the encounters I experienced allowed me to see the multifaceted structure of culture. There are different ways of experiencing a culture; anywhere from not experiencing it at all to all the way to full. No matter what level one feels comfortable, there is an opportunity to learn many things. One could observe common behaviors or practices or you could get to know someone. There are infinite different options to broaden your view as a counselor.

Discussion and Implications

When working with other cultural groups, Western clinical techniques have faced serious cultural barriers. Mental illness is a combination of both global and culture-specific factors. This is one reason that cross-cultural competency is an integral aspect of counseling training. My cross-cultural experiences have affected my life in more ways than I could ever express. Experiencing other cultures has been a passion of mine for many years, and it is no surprise to me that these experiences have broadened my view of behaviors, environments and people. Just as Ishii et al. (2009) found regarding students who engaged in cultural immersion, I experienced a great deal in regards to my skills, awareness and knowledge of cross-cultural interactions.

Future Research

With the ever changing American society, it is important to keep trying to better understand how counselors can learn, practice, and adapt their multicultural competencies. There needs to be more research done to better understand the extent to which, and why, cultural immersion and cultural contact enhance counselors' competencies. Understanding this will make it easier for counseling professors and supervisors to promote these attributes in counseling students.

It would benefit the counseling community to know more about the differences between experiences of cultural immersion, and cultural contact. Does one experience offer more to educating or benefiting a counselor, or is that dependent on the counselor's unique personality. This research, as well as identification of essential factors that

promote intercultural awareness would be useful in the development of future training programs.

Conclusion

Parham (2001) suggested that learning real multicultural competence is incomplete using only a single textbook or course. Both my immersion experience and cross-cultural interactions thus far has tested my multicultural competence. Originally setting out to have cross cultural experiences, I expected to come back with definitive answers and a significant understanding of how I as a counselor understand the world. My cultural immersions and cross-cultural interactions increased my skill range, my knowledge and my awareness to work with diverse communities and have left me with a thirst for more education in this area.

Counselors in the United States practice in an increasingly diverse and ever changing society. It is vital for any counselor to always be learning and growing in these ways. Counselor educators have a great responsibility to inspire the use of various tools to help counselors continue to grow. In this way, it feels appropriate to describe this as a journey more so than a project, because a project implies that there is a definite beginning and end. This experience, as I learned, will continue to evolve as both society and I as a counselor change. To this end, I encourage counselors of all status to begin to look closer at their interactions with others and to consider having more cross culture experiences. There is always something more to learn and become aware of.

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