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A novel approach: Fictional prose as imagined contact for counselors-in-training working with cultural others

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A Novel Approach: Fictional Prose as Imagined Contact for Counselors-in-Training working
with Cultural Others

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Dedication

To the counselor-in-training: There is less to fear than you think.

Acknowledgments

My involvement in the clinical mental health counseling program at James Madison University has been a true and transformative adventure that has added immense meaning and vivacity to my life, while weaving within me a deep sense of wholeness. I am utterly convinced that such a life-affirming and personal growth experience would not have been possible without the profoundly precious individuals infused within it. These include members of both my cohort and the counseling faculty. I honor and celebrate each and every one of you. With my whole heart, I thank you for teaching me, seeing me, sharing with me your humanness, and supporting me in facing my greatest fears. I am a better person for it.

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Abstract

Meeting with clients for the first time provokes anxiety in many counselors-in-training, which can be exacerbated when working with clients from differing cultural backgrounds. This heightened anxiety can limit the capacity of beginning counselors to empathize with cultural others, which decreases the chance of powerful, therapeutic relationships being established. In addition, many counseling programs offer limited multicultural experiences that might actually prompt intergroup anxiety. It is suggested within this article that fictional prose be used as an additional resource in the classroom that acts as an imagined contact experience to aid in the cultivation of cultural empathy while potentially assuaging intergroup anxiety in counseling students.

Fictional Prose as Imagined Contact for Counselors-in-Training

We lose ourselves in what we read, only to return to ourselves, transformed and part of a more expansive world.

— Judith Butler

Introduction

The act of reading fictional prose can be much more than indulging in a pastime of make-believe. Rather, it is to participate in a stimulating simulated experience that requires a reader to gently surrender concretized beliefs of self, others, and the world. Through this relinquishment the opportunity to feel what it might be like to be someone other than oneself is made possible, giving way to a greater sense of empathy in the reader.

For counselors-in-training, empathy is an essential tool used to make authentic connections with clients, which predicts positive outcomes for therapy. However, many students exhibit intense anxiety associated with the uncertainty of building therapeutic relationships with clients, especially when those clients differ from them culturally. Such anxiety restricts the capacities of counseling students to understand or feel what their clients are actually experiencing, which makes the creation of a therapeutic connection less likely.

Much of the anxiety experienced by counselors-in-training is the result of negative, limited, or nonexistent interactions with cultural others. Although most counseling programs offer students many of the necessary introductory experiences that will prepare them for their work with a diverse population, fictional prose may be a viable avenue for counselor educators and supervisors to address the underlying anxiety while kindling creativity and empathy for diverse populations such as, in the case presented here, the rural poor.

Anxiety and Empathy in Counselors-in-Training

Anxiety is a normal part of life. Everyone experiences it in some form, to some degree, and at some point or another in their lives. So, why should counselors-in-training be any different? In fact, the journey of becoming a professional counselor provokes anxiety in many graduate students (Fulton & Cashwell, 2015).

At moderate levels, anxiety can improve performance during tasks that require stamina or persistence (Brooks, 2014; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). However, counselor self-efficacy (Daniels & Larson, 2001; Hill, Sullivan, Knox, & Schlosser, 2007), counselor intentions (Kelly, Hall, & Miller, 1989), counselor self-awareness (Bandura, 1956), and counseling performance (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003) are all negatively impacted when anxiety is experienced as excessive. In addition, and, perhaps, more worthy of noting, heightened anxiety has the potential to stymie many beginning counselors' ability to empathize with their clients (Fulton & Cashwell, 2015; Todd, Forstmann, Burgmer, Brooks, & Galinsky, 2015). Empathy is widely recognized as one of the most essential ingredients to creating a powerful relationship with clients, which, in turn, predicts positive outcomes for the overall counseling process (Moyers & Miller, 2013). Without it, the therapeutic relationship, which is the seed to a fruitful therapeutic experience, lays challenged to germinate.

The experience of heightened anxiety in counselors-in-training is likely to result from being confronted with the ambiguity and uncertainty associated with creating a therapeutic relationship with clients (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). For example, Todd et al., (2015) found that uncertainty increased participants' reliance on self-knowledge when supposing others' mental states, resulting in more inferences, which limited perspective-taking abilities. In other words, counselors-in-training were motivated to reduce uncertainty produced by anxiety by relying on personal experiences to infer their clients' perspectives and feelings, which compromised their capacity to empathize with the unique experiences expressed by their clients. Similarly, Hill et al. (2007) examined the feelings and concerns of five doctoral students in their first semester of a counseling program. It was found that all five students experienced anxiety related to the uncertainty around their abilities to connect with clients (Hill et al., 2007).

Participants also described feelings of under-identification and over-identification. In regard to under-identification, it was discovered that participants directed their attention on differences related to cultural identity, which led them to believe that their clients would not be able to relate to them because they had not had similar experiences. The anxiety associated with the uncertainty of how to connect with clients from differing cultural backgrounds is in accordance with the social phenomenon of intergroup anxiety put forth by Stephan and Stephan (1985).

Intergroup Anxiety, Program Limitations, and Cultural Empathy

According to Stephen and Stephen (2007), intergroup anxiety is the term used to describe the distress or uneasiness that arises during interactions between members of any two groups (e.g. racial and ethnic groups, political parties, religious organizations, etc.). Prejudice and stereotyping are common ways people attempt to appease their intergroup anxiety (Renfro & Stephan, 2010). However, both of these anxietytic strategies hinder empathic abilities. In a study carried out by Castiglione, Licciardello, Rampullo, and Campione (2013), it was found that 93 heterosexual male high school students expressing relatively high levels of prejudice related to intergroup anxiety had significantly impaired expressions of empathy toward homosexual males. Additionally, people not only employ prejudices or stereotypic beliefs when experiencing intergroup anxiety, but also fear that they may be ridiculed or rejected, which can exacerbate feelings of uncertainty and lead to avoidant behaviors (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). In a study regarding a classroom conversation centered around the topic of race, white students experienced confusion, disorientation, and uneasiness, which led many of them to refrain from verbally participating in the discussion in fear of being viewed as biased or ignorant by their fellow classmates of color (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). The fear of coming across as prejudiced or incompetent can also lead counseling students to behave in unusually positive

ways toward culturally differing others, which is likely to backfire with clients perceiving their forced attempts as being an expression of the very dispositions trying to be avoided (Renfro & Stephan, 2010).

According to Allport (1954), under the appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact is the best way to reduce intergroup anxiety. However, counseling students can often have limited opportunities to interact with cultural others (Fox, 2003; Sue & Sue, 1999). Their programs typically consist of members from majority groups (Dyche & Zayas, 2001). In addition, counseling programs may often implement a cultural knowledge approach as the main way to prepare students for their work with culturally diverse clients (Dyche & Zayas, 2001). This approach has been criticized for providing counselors-in-training with an overly simplified version of what culture is, which can actually intensify intergroup anxiety in students (Dyche & Zayas, 2001). This particular approach also tends to concentrate on the use of specific techniques, instead of the capacity to empathize with clients (Glauser & Bozarth). Nevertheless, possessing culturally-relevant information remains essential to accurately understanding and sharing the feelings of clients from various backgrounds.

Indeed, empathy is typically valued cross-culturally (Sue & Sue, 1999). Yet, just like cultural knowledge, empathy alone is not enough to create a therapeutic relationship, especially when considering that the construct itself has been greatly influenced by Western Euro-American values (Chung & Bemak, 2002). Thus, counseling programs should aim to cultivate in students the ability to express empathy in ways that resonate with their clients' culturally influenced frames of reference (Glauser & Bozarth, 2001). Such an approach is likely to reduce intergroup anxiety among counselors-in-training. This was shown in a study by Aberson and Haag (2007) that explored intergroup anxiety in 153 white undergraduate students interacting with African

Americans. The researchers found that improved perspective taking, a cornerstone of empathy, was linked to reduced intergroup anxiety, which abated stereotype endorsement and negative intergroup attitudes.

Since cultural empathy has the potential to reduce intergroup anxiety in counselors-in-training, and because several imitations exist in current academic modalities, prose fiction may prove a viable method in the nurturing of cultural empathy among graduate students studying counseling.

Imagined Contact and Fictional Prose

Crisp and Turner (2009) stated that imagined intergroup contact can be just as powerful as actual contact with member of other groups. In their studies, they found that by stimulating the human imagination they were able to simulate social interactions that led to decreases in intergroup anxiety (Crisp & Turner, 2009). Furthermore, they suggested that imagining intergroup interactions can reduce self-stereotyping and the impact it has on performance (Crisp & Turner, 2009).

It is proposed that fiction has the potential to stimulate imagined intergroup contact by activating the human imagination to provide a kind of virtual experience, similar to a flight simulator used for pilot training (Mar, Oatley, De la Paz, Hirsh, & Peterson, 2006), which can cast doubts on prejudices, challenge stereotypes, and help individuals reach across cultures to see life from different points of view (Bartol & Richardson, 1998). It can also arouse authentic empathy-based reactions when experiencing the trials and tribulations of particular protagonists (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). In several studies carried out by Kaufman and Libby (2012), researchers found that the greater the ability of a fictional work to evoke experience-taking in a reader the more likely the reader was to surrender their self-concept, leading to lower levels of

stereotyping and more favorable attitudes toward homosexuals and African Americans. They also discovered that first-person narratives, compared to third-person narratives, increased experience taking. Experience-taking was described as, “the imaginative process of spontaneously assuming the identity of a character in a narrative and simulating that character’s thoughts, emotions, behaviors, goals, and traits as if they were one’s own” (Kaufman & Libby, 2012, p. 2). A distinction between experience-taking and perspective-taking was made by pointing out that the concept of perspective-taking includes relying on conceptual knowledge to infer how another person might be feeling or experiencing a particular situation, whereas, experience-taking involves a surrender of the self in order to participate in a true experience of another (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). Additionally, Mar, Oatley, and Peterson (2009) conducted a study that included a total of 94 participants and after controlling for participant age, experience with English, and intelligence, found that likelihood of becoming immersed in a story predicted higher empathy scores. Furthermore, Kidd and Castano (2013) suggested that fiction has the capacity to convey social values and expand cultural knowledge, as well as, reduce the strangeness of others and recognize similarities between groups. They stated that “fiction may change how, not just what, people think about others” (p. 377). In five experiments they found that reading fiction led to improved empathy compared with reading nonfiction (Kidd & Castano, 2013). They also discovered that empathy was greater in readers of “literary fiction” compared to readers of “popular fiction” (Kidd & Castano, 2013). They suggested that the reason for this was due to the fact that popular fiction typically includes characters that are internally predictable, and who possibly reinforce stereotypes, whereas, literary fiction includes characters with complicated internal frameworks that challenge readers to think much more critically when inferring characters’ thoughts and feelings (Kidd & Castano, 2013).

Past interactions with cultural others that have been perceived as negative increase the likelihood that anxiety will occur during future interactions and prove much more difficult to pacify during those exchanges (Stephan & Stephan, 2007). Therefore, fictional prose as a virtual simulation also allows counselors-in-training the freedom to make mistakes in their attempts to understand others without experiencing potential negative consequences (Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013). This trial run experience has the benefit of lowering the chances that intergroup anxiety will be reinforced or even occur. Still, prose fiction cannot replace actual experience (Bartol & Richardson, 1998) and should not be used as stand-alone method in counseling programs (Fox, 2003). Thus, counselor educators' best bet may be to assign their students a required work of fiction to compliment weekly readings of a particular textbook during a 15-week semester course. In addition to this pairing, course instructors can construct questions to accompany the readings that lead students to the conceptualization of fictional characters and promote empathy (Gibson, 2007). Such questions might be more content-laden at the beginning of a semester (e.g. comparing the fictional characters to certain theories found in the textbook, and vice versa) to get students comfortable sharing their thoughts in front of one another, but become more feeling-focused as the semester progresses (Gibson, 2007). As questions take on a more intimate and personal quality, instructors may encourage students to self-disclose personal feelings regarding the fictional story and its characters to the rest of the class (Gibson, 2007). A classroom discussion regarding a piece of prose may not only grant counseling students with the opportunity to explore their personal findings with others, but bestow them with a sense of common humanity and an awareness of the prismatic lens that exists to view life. Furthermore, a classroom discussion may provide counselor educators insight into

their students' perceptions of cultural diversity (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002), which could help them gauge their students' overall professional development as counselors-in-training.

It is important to note that using fiction to induce positive changes in the counselor-in-training may actually reinforce stereotypes, hegemonic beliefs, and negative feelings regarding members of other groups (Jarvis, 2012). Furthermore, counselor educators must pay attention to the fact that not all students will be equally enthralled with the task of reading a fictional piece of literature and may actually find it to be a grueling task (Fox, 2003). As mentioned above, the improvement of empathy through prose fiction is largely dependent on a person's willingness to become absorbed by the story they are reading (Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Mar et al., 2009). If a counseling student finds reading to be a painful undertaking, it is less likely that they will benefit from such an experience. As result, alternative forms of fiction that include identifying and interpreting the subjective experiences of others may benefit counselors-in-training just as well (Kidd & Castano, 2013). However, Fox (2003) suggested that a story in the form of something like a film would not be able to produce the same effects of a good book, because it lacks the imaginative element of creative engagement.

Lastly, counseling is a creative endeavor (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003) and approaches that evoke creativity are essential in the training of effective counselors (Bruneau & Pehrsson, 2014). Gladding (2008) suggested that without creativity the counseling profession and, perhaps, all helping professions, would not exist. Therefore, it is through a device, like fictional prose, that beginning counselors have the opportunity to learn about themselves as creative individuals and how to utilize creative methods when empathizing with an array of human experiences.

Rural Poor in America and Suggested Reading List

Those considered to be poor are among the most marginalized groups in the United States, and are frequent targets of criticism and stereotyping (Foss et al., 2011). In 2014, more than 46 million people were considered to be living in poverty in the United States (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2015) using the marker of a yearly income below \$11, 880 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Poverty does not discriminate across religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political affiliation, or visa status (Pressley & Sifford, 2012). Researchers and various service providers widely recognize that individuals who are classified as poor in America are exposed to a variety of stressful life events (Amato & Zuo, 1992) that put them at greater risk for mental illness (Hudson, 2005). In fact, clients that account for the majority of counselors' caseloads in community centers include those classified as living in poverty (Foss et al., 2011).

The majority of individuals who suffer from poverty are from predominately rural areas, specifically rural areas in southern states (Pressley & Sifford, 2012). In a study conducted by Amato and Zuo (1992), which controlled for sex, age, race, family status, education, employment, and income, revealed that rural poverty, when compared to urban poverty, contributed to higher individual mental health issues. Therefore, it is essential for counseling students to prepare themselves to work with this population, while recognizing that the programs they are enrolled in are likely normed in favor of middle-class values (Foss, Generali, & Kress, 2011; Liu, Pickett & Ivey, 2007) and consist of members that belong to a higher socioeconomic classes (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). It also worth noting that Hawley, Leibert, and Lane (2014) found that counselors tend to more negatively perceive clients of lower-SES levels than clients from higher-SES levels.

The failure to possess an awareness of one's own biases and prejudice throws a wrench into the ability to empathize with clients from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, counselors-in-training must gain insight into the culture of rural poverty, along with their personal values and stereotypes related to people who are considered to be underprivileged and underrepresented, if they are to build a strong therapeutic alliance grounded in empathy. One way to do this is through the use of written works of fiction.

The following list of books includes 22 novels, which is by no means exhaustive. The list includes fictional characters from rural, impoverished backgrounds to help provide counselors-in-training with a simulated experience that has the potential to mitigate intergroup anxiety and cultivates cultural empathy. A common qualm experienced by students' working with the rural poor include uncertainty around abilities to connect with such clients due to a sense of under-identification and lack of familiarity. Some of the prominent themes to consider when attempting to understand the variability of lived experiences of this particular population may include: career development; crisis and trauma; family structure/dynamics; human growth and identity development; gender and sexuality; and substance use. Several of the 22 works fall into several of the themes listed below.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Adiga, A., & Petermeier, A. (2010). *The white tiger*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Burgess, M. (2015). *Billy Elliot*. Somerset, UK: The Chicken House.

House, S. (2001). *Clay's quilt*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Kingsolver, B. (2012). *Flight behavior*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Miller, A. (1996). *Death of a Salesman: Revised edition*. London, UK: Penguin.

Steinbeck, J. (1939). *The grapes of wrath*. London, UK: Penguin.

Straight, S. (2013). *I been in sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots*. New York, NY: Open Road Media.

Walls, J. (2014). *The silver star*. New York, NY: Scribner.

CRISIS AND TRAUMA

Allison, D. (2005). *Bastard out of Carolina*. London, UK: Penguin.

Campbell, B. J. (2011). *Once upon a river*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Fowler, C. M. (1997). *Before women had wings*. Chicago, IL: Ballantine Books

Hinton, S. E. (2012). *The outsiders*. London, UK: Penguin.

House, S. (2001). *Clay's quilt*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Kingsolver, B. (2012). *Flight behavior*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Erdrich, L. (2016). *LaRose*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Walls, J. (2014). *The silver star*. New York, NY: Scribner.

Ward, J. (2012). *Salvage the Bones*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

FAMILY SYSTEMS/DYNAMICS

Alexie, S. (2013). *The Lone Ranger and Tonto fistfight in heaven*. New York, NY: Open Road Media.

Allison, D. (2005). *Bastard out of Carolina*. London, UK: Penguin.

Burgess, M. (2015). *Billy Elliot*. Somerset, UK: The Chicken House.

Dorris, M. (2003). *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water: A novel*. London, UK: Macmillan.

Earley, T. (2001). *Jim the boy*. New York City, NY: Back Bay Books.

Fowler, C. M. (1997). *Before women had wings*. Chicago, IL: Ballantine Books

Gaines, Ernest J. (1992). *A gathering of old men, in my father's house*. New York, NY: Vintage

Hinton, S. E. (2012). *The outsiders*. London, UK: Penguin.

House, S. (2001). *Clay's quilt*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Kingsolver, B. (2012). *Flight behavior*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Erdrich, L. (2016). *LaRose*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Miller, A. (1996). *Death of a Salesman: Revised edition*. London, UK: Penguin.

Reynolds, S. (1997). *The rapture of Canaan*. London, UK: Penguin.

Steinbeck, J. (1939). *The grapes of wrath*. London, UK: Penguin.

Walls, J. (2014). *The silver star*. New York, NY: Scribner.

Ward, J. (2012). *Salvage the bones*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Woodrell, D. (2007). *Winter's bone*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group.

HUMAN GROWTH AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Alexie, S. (2013). *The Lone Ranger and Tonto fistfight in heaven*. New York, NY: Open Road
Media.

Campbell, B. J. (2011). *Once upon a river*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Earley, T. (2001). *Jim the boy*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books.

Flagg, F. (2011). *Fried green tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*. New York, NY: Ballantine
Books.

Gaines, Ernest J. (1992). *A gathering of old men, in my father's house*. New York, NY: Vintage

Hinton, S. E. (2012). *The outsiders*. London, UK: Penguin.

Woodrell, D. (2007). *Winter's bone*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Allison, D. (2005). *Bastard out of Carolina*. London, UK: Penguin.

Burgess, M. (2015). *Billy Elliot*. Somerset, UK: The Chicken House.

Campbell, B. J. (2011). *Once upon a river*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Flagg, F. (2011). *Fried green tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books

Fowler, C. M. (1997). *Before women had wings*. Chicago, IL: Ballantine Books

Kingsolver, B. (2012). *Flight behavior*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Reynolds, S. (1997). *The rapture of Canaan*. London, UK: Penguin.

Straight, S. (2013). *I been in sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots*. New York, NY: Open Road Media.

Walls, J. (2014). *The silver star*. New York, NY: Scribner.

Ward, J. (2012). *Salvage the bones*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

SUBSTANCE USE

Campbell, B. J. (2011). *Once upon a river*.

Fowler, C. M. (1997). *Before women had wings*. Chicago, IL: Ballantine Books

Erdrich, L. (2016). *LaRose*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Straight, S. (2013). *I been in sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots*. New York, NY: Open Road Media.

Ward, J. (2012). *Salvage the bones*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Woodrell, D. (2007). *Winter's bone*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group.

Conclusion

The United States is a beautiful symphony of human experiences, and as an even more variegated composition continues to be written it is necessary that counselors are prepared to work with human beings from all walks of life. In fact, it is the ethical duty of counselors to promote and possess respect for human diversity (American Counseling Association, 2014). However, experiences of interacting with cultural others, both inside and outside the classroom, are typically limited for many counselors-in-training, until their practicum or internship experiences. By this time, students are left feeling anxious and unsure about how to meet the unique cultural needs of their clients, which makes it less likely that a therapeutic relationship will form and that the overall therapy will be successful.

Fictional prose has the potential to remedy students quandaries by simulating interpersonal contact and offering them with positive experiences, which otherwise had been negative, limited, or nonexistent. As a result, counseling students may gain the necessary intellectual knowledge and emotional insights to offer authentic cultural empathy toward their clients as intergroup anxiety lessens.

It is not only important that students learn to empathize accurately with the cultural framework of their clients, but that counselor educators and supervisors make use of creative instruments, like fictional prose, which have the potential to activate the human imagination. After all, counseling is, above all, an artistic endeavor that requires originality of thought and expression.

By promoting originality through creative approaches in the classroom, counselors-in-training become much more flexible in their therapeutic applications. This allows them to adequately navigate the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in the profession, which is typically the cause of much of their anxiety in the first place.

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