Strategies to Create a Culturally Responsive Learning Environment

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Abstract: This article is based on the workshop *Keeping it Real: Illusions of Equality and Justice on College Campuses*, presented at the 31st Annual Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability and Diversity. Lived experiences provide evidence that despite increased dialogue and numerous initiatives undertaken, both students and faculty from culturally diverse populations face discrimination in academic settings.

Keywords: social justice, racial microaggressions, disability studies

Overview of the Issue

Professionals from various practice disciplines, (i.e., mental health counseling, public health, rehabilitation counseling, social work, and criminal justice) espouse the need for cultural competence in order to provide effective services to diverse populations (Bemak, Chung, Talleyrand, Jones, & Daquin, 2011; Cushman, Delva, Franks, Jimenez-Bautista, Moon-Howard, Glover, & Begg, 2015; Matteliano, & Stone, 2014; Nadan & Ben-Ari, 2013; Wood, 2013). In fact, several counselor education and psychology training programs across the nation have infused cultural and social justice perspectives throughout the curriculum that influence future practitioners' ethical decision-making (Pack-Brown, Thomas, & Seymour, 2008; Zalaquett, Foley, Tillotson, Dinsmore, & Hof, 2008). Training strategies have typically combined theory with practice and focused on the acquisition of specific awareness, knowledge and skills posited to enhance understanding of culturally different clients (e.g., those with racial/ethnic, disability, gender, sexual orientation, language and religious differences). However, despite increased dialogue, revised accreditation standards, and numerous initiatives, it appears that culturally diverse students and even faculty still face acts of racism in the academy. These contemporary acts of racism, known as microaggressions, are defined as "brief, commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). These targeted groups also include persons with disabilities.

While disability is not analogous with race or ethnicity, it appears that racial/ethnic group membership is related to disability. Specifically, the latest U.S. Census reports, African Americans account for 22.2% of persons with disabilities; Hispanic/Latino Americans 17.8%, Native Americans/American Indians 16.8%, and Asian Americans 14.5%. Additionally both culturally different groups share many common experiences. Specifically, persons with disabilities and other culturally different groups have a mutual history of systemic oppression, inequality, and bigotry. Their identities, value systems, and beliefs have all been historically determined by the majority group (Olkin, 2002). Therefore, the convergence of race/ethnicity and disability cannot be ignored. The workshop, *Keeping it Real: Illusions of Equality and*

Justice on College Campuses, presented at the 31st Annual Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability and Diversity, provided evidence that culturally responsive training must include a discussion about disabilities with regard to working with students and faculty from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Access and opportunity enables increasing numbers of students and faculty from culturally diverse groups, to pursue higher education and employment in the academy. However, this has not necessarily translated into welcoming, non-biased attitudes from the majority of students and faculty members. Many individuals from culturally diverse groups continue to experience the negative consequences of contemporary expressions of verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities.

Evidence from the Film, *If These Halls Could Talk*

The documentary film, *If These Halls Could Talk,* showcases eleven college students who intimately share their lived experiences of cultural diversity on college campuses across the country. These discussions take place under the guidance of Lee Mun Wah, who acts as both facilitator and director of the film. As demonstrated in the workshop, the film is used as a stimulus for needed but often delayed dialogues about cultural diversity and disability on college campuses.

Documentary participants' anecdotes underscore the negative consequences of microaggressions. As previously mentioned, microaggressions are acts of intentional or unintentional discrimination based on one's group membership. Counseling psychologist Derald Sue further identified three forms of microaggressions: (1) microassaults, as explicit verbal or normal attacks meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions; (2) microinsults as communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity, and (3) microinvalidations as communications that exclude, negate or nullify the psychological reality of a culturally different person (Sue et al., 2007). Participants in the documentary supported how the chilly climate of the academy has been equally discouraging for them as students. For example, students who identified as culturally different generally had the shared experience of being ostracized from their student bodies at large. This parallels students with disabilities' own experiences, who because of their differences are often socially isolated in higher education (Liasidou, 2014).

Students with disabilities and acquired conditions fare no better in the academy than those who were assessed by race/ethnicity alone. In fact, the chilly, unwelcoming climate for these students is often expressed with devaluation, doubt, and exclusion. Examples of devaluation may be manifested with faculty overlooking, rather than correcting students' mistakes and encouraging students to switch to less rigorous majors. Expectations may be lowered, sending students the message that they don't need to do much to "get by." Success may be met with suspicion. Exclusion is common for students with disabilities who are typically separated from their able-bodied peers when utilizing support services (Lissaidou, 2014). This

exclusion causes these students to be singled out and reinforces the stereotype of neediness among persons with disabilities. These actions not only serve to erode students' self-esteem and define them as second-class citizens but also contribute to the system of differential treatment, disempowerment, and marginalization which often operates in majority classrooms (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Liasidou, 2014).

In the film one White male student who was HIV positive faced prejudice because of his disability status. His experience of discrimination based solely on a biological factor demonstrates the similar experiences of bigotry often experienced by people of color. This student was asked to describe his experiences of being discriminated against and not having the same amount of privilege that he had prior to his disability status. The student shared that he now knows what it is like to be judged even before people get to know him. This reflects similarities in the majority culture of able-bodied individuals and how that group may take for granted the benefits and rights that come along with the "able" classification. As with race/ethnicity, being in the majority in-group provides access and resources that may not be appreciated until that membership is compromised.

One student, who identified as an Italian woman, admitted that because the color of her skin is white, she usually did not have any trouble on campus. In effect, because she passes for "White" she does not feel racism on a daily basis. It is also important to note that another student in the documentary admitted that rather than deal with the retaliation that is associated with claiming one's indigenous heritage, she chose to identify with only the Scotch-Irish part of her family, while concealing parts of her ethnic heritage. These examples mirror the experiences of people with invisible disabilities who often choose to keep their disability hidden rather than face the stigma that accompanies the label of being disabled (Baldridge & Swift, 2013; Collins & Mowbray, 2005). These secret identities are maintained in order to avoid being treated differently or negatively by their peers from the majority group.

The facilitator and director of the documentary, Lee Mun Wah, also shared his own experiences of cultural diversity with the group and charged them to imagine the stress, anguish and cognitive dissonance that one must experience from having to always be aware of what he/she says and how he/she may be perceived. One student explained how as one of only two people of color participating in the documentary, he felt uncomfortable. The student explained that people of the majority culture like to assume others should feel comfortable because they, themselves, are comfortable. Again parallels to people with disabilities can be made with regard to others being comfortable. For example, research indicates that service provisions for persons with disabilities are impacted by the level of comfort of the counselor (Friedman, Helm, & Woodman, 2012; O'Brian, Packman, Onslow, & Cream, 2003). As asserted by the student in the documentary, it appears that people of the majority culture do not see the world as it is, but rather as they experience it.

Overall, the documentary provided a platform for a discussion about cultural diversity and disability on college campuses to occur among the film participants and among groups who view the film. While the documentary can be a powerful tool in discussing matters of cultural diversity on college campuses, it has limitations. First, it may be helpful to unpack issues of gender, sexuality, disability, and race/ethnicity. Secondly, there appears to be a lack of practical strategies that rehabilitation counseling educators can employ to increase dialogue about cultural diversity in the academy.

Response and Recommendations

In response to the need to provide culturally responsive services to an increasingly growing multicultural population in the United States, the following suggestions have been gathered based on extant researchers and authors own personal experiences. Educators have called for multicultural competence and social justice initiatives within psychology and counselor education programs. Educators, in particular, are tasked to teach students the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities to work with culturally and ethnically diverse populations. However, evidence exists that within the very classrooms where multicultural and social justice curriculum is being taught, students and faculty of color still face different and unequal treatment. The shared lived experiences of documentary participants may be instructive to administrators and faculty in higher education to increase awareness and sensitivity regarding the impact of this treatment and modify their behaviors. The following strategies were gleaned from extant research and are offered to change the environment and create a more culturally responsive learning climate:

1. Both students and faculty must understand that not everyone in their program, department, or school is dedicated to creating a culturally responsive learning environment. Students and faculty can take advantage of opportunities within their courses and organizations to promote cultural knowledge acquisition. This can be achieved through classroom activities (e.g. group work, case studies, role plays, class discussions) and community based projects in student organizations which focus on issues related to serving culturally diverse groups.

2. As demonstrated in the documentary, *If These Halls Could Talk*, intimate encounters with culturally diverse people can lead to more positive attitudes towards people of color and people with disabilities. As such, service learning provides students with hands-on experiences working one-on-one with culturally diverse people. Students are afforded the ability to transform multicultural and disability knowledge and skills acquired from courses into practice within the community (Boston, 2009). Faculty is encouraged to add experiential learning experiences throughout the course curriculum. Partnerships with regional and local community agencies will provide students with exposure to real-world multicultural counseling encounters throughout their program instead of only during the standard practicum and internships placements.

3. Don't take for granted that culturally diverse students are culturally competent. Research conducted in the area of multicultural counseling competence indicates that students' ethnicity is not a good predictor of multicultural knowledge (Boston, 2009; Donnell, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy & Meyers, 1999). Though students of color may have a greater interest in multicultural issues, they may not necessarily be more knowledgeable about these matters. Therefore, faculty must assume that all students come to the classroom with some understanding and work towards increasing their students' knowledge of multicultural counseling.

4. Faculty should lead students in discussions about the media's portrayal of culturally diverse groups and how these portrayals impact attitudes, values, and self-esteem of students. Faculty can help students better understand how the media influences how we think about race/ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, language, and religious differences through the images displayed through mass media (Littlefield, 2008). Discussions should promote exploration of personal biases regarding race, gender, disability, privilege, oppression, and socioeconomic status of individuals and how these factors will shape students' role as a counselor.

5. Faculty should engage in deep self-reflection of their own attitudes, beliefs, and biases about those who are culturally different, including those with racial/ethnic, disability, gender, sexual orientation, language, and religious differences. Awareness will create an opportunity to challenge oneself and lead to better outcomes in creating a culturally responsive learning environment for all.

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