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Infusing Social Justice Advocacy into Counselor Education: Strategies and Recommendations

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Infusing Social Justice Advocacy into Counselor Education: Strategies and Recommendations

Abstract

As the counseling profession calls counselors to act as social justice advocates, it is imperative that they are prepared for this role. This places responsibility on counselor education programs to incorporate the necessary training into existing programs. There are strategies for infusing social justice advocacy instruction throughout the existing curricula with reasonable investments of time, energy, and funds. The purpose of this article is to offer practical strategies and recommendations, grounded in critical pedagogy and supported by a growing evidence base, that can be implemented in existing counselor education programs in order to provide a strong foundation for social justice advocacy work.

Author's Notes

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Keywords

advocacy, critical pedagogy, multicultural competence, social justice

Although there has always been a strong connection between social justice advocacy and counseling (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001), recent literature has renewed the emphasis on the importance of advocacy within the profession (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010; Steele, 2008). Now, social justice advocacy is being viewed as an integral part of the counselor's professional identity (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010; King, 2012; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Ratts & Wood, 2011; Toporek, Lewis & Crethar, 2009). This increased attention has come about due in part to the multicultural counseling competency movement. Attention to the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCCs) developed by Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992) and revised in 2016 (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016) has led to increased awareness of the impact of oppression, prejudice and inequality on diverse clients at multiple levels. For example, at the individual level clients may experience internalized oppression around biopsychosocial characteristics that do not reflect mainstream norms; appropriate and relevant services may be unavailable in schools and communities, or worse clients may experience outright discrimination in education or employment; and state or national policies and laws may exclude protections or rights for vulnerable populations.

Advocates for social justice seek to change the institutional oppression that is present in society (Shin, 2008). This type of advocacy requires counselors to confront oppression on the individual (micro), community (meso) and public policy (macro) levels as outlined in the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002). Through codes of ethics, professional mandates, and training standards, counselor educators are called to train students across counseling specializations (i.e., addiction counseling, career counseling, clinical mental health counseling, marriage and family counseling, school counseling, student affairs/college counseling), to be equipped to assume a role of a social justice advocate (American Counseling

Association [ACA], 2014; American Mental Health Counselors Association [AMHCA], 2010; American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2010; Chang & Gnilka, 2010; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2009; Gehart & Lucas, 2007). All counselors must be prepared to address systems of oppression, discrimination, and privilege at multiple levels, and this requires that they have the necessary awareness, knowledge, and skills to do so.

Yet this task of preparing counselors to be social justice advocates may also seem daunting in terms of resources. With universities facing budget cuts and rising costs that mandate the implementation of cost-saving measures, adding new courses or new faculty may not be a reasonable expectation for many programs. However, there are several ways that advocacy instruction can be infused throughout existing curricula. The purpose of this article is to offer practical strategies and recommendations, grounded in critical pedagogy and supported by a growing evidence base that can be implemented in existing counselor education programs in order to provide a strong foundation for social justice advocacy work.

Counselors and Advocacy: An Integrated Identity

Counselor education programs provide multicultural education, which prepares counselors to work with diverse clients, but this is just a small piece of the necessary preparation. In order for counselors to be culturally competent, they must be prepared to take on advocacy and leadership roles (CACREP, 2009; Chang & Gnilka, 2010; Gehart & Lucas, 2007). Culturally competent counselors must be able to address systems of oppression, discrimination, and privilege at multiple levels, and this requires that they have the necessary awareness, knowledge, and skills to do so. In a concerted effort to advance the counseling profession and promote greater social justice, counselor education programs are being urgently called upon to

foster a unified professional identity and train counselors with leadership and advocacy knowledge and skills (Chang et al., 2012; Ratts & Wood, 2011).

Yet while the charge is clear and congruent with the history and current development of the counseling profession, there are a number of identified factors that contribute to a slow move to action. Smith, Reynolds & Rovnak (2009) asserted that social justice advocacy represents a fundamental change to the counseling profession by requiring counselors to go beyond work with individual clients in order to promote societal change. They cautioned that there are limitations and potential problems associated with adopting an advocacy agenda that may conflict with individual politics and values, and call for more “research, tested methodologies, and identified best practices” (p.490). Chang & Gnilka (2010), Gehart & Lucas (2007), and Steele (2008) indicated that counselors feel unprepared to address social justice advocacy because many counselor education programs fail to provide adequate preparation in advocacy theory and practice.

While the charge to promote social justice does confront counselor educators and trainees with sociopolitical issues, the very essence of the field of professional counseling is aligned with Watts’ (2004) assertion that the sociopolitical realm cannot be ignored as a “vital aspect of human development” (p.861). In fact, King’s (2012) qualitative analysis of how ethical codes define professional identity across the mental health professions identified growth, development and wellness as distinguishing the work of professional counselors. Furthermore, recent consideration of counseling and advocacy with diverse populations who are often cited as challenging to counselors’ individual beliefs, such as gay, lesbian or bisexual clients, stipulates that counselors are bound to uphold the values of the counseling profession and bracket their individual beliefs (Francis & Dugger, 2014; Herlihy, Hermann, & Greden, 2012; Kocet &

Herlihy, 2014). This requires confronting societal forces that result in marginalization and increase the risk of mental health problems for diverse populations.

Furthermore, Decker (2013) recently examined the relationships between social justice advocacy training as part of a master's-level counselor education program, ratings of competence in social justice advocacy, and the likelihood to advocate. Evidence was found to support the inclusion of social justice advocacy training in counselor education programs. Decker (2013) found that there is a significant relationship between social justice advocacy training and ratings of social justice advocacy competence. The findings also indicated that advocacy training leads to an increased likelihood to advocate particularly at community and societal levels and that counselor trainees who report greater advocacy competence are more likely to engage in advocacy activities at the three levels of advocacy as defined by the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002). This is consistent with the findings of Miller et al. (2009) who concluded college students' beliefs about social justice self-efficacy and outcome expectations were significantly correlated with social justice interest and commitment. The authors noted that an increased interest in social justice was related to the students' commitment to future social justice advocacy efforts.

Notwithstanding the ambivalence and misconceptions about the sociopolitical nature of social justice advocacy, or the dearth of evidence based strategies (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Brubaker, Puig, Reese, & Young, 2010; Odegard & Vereen, 2010; Ratts & Wood, 2011), there is compelling evidence to move forward decisively in integrating advocacy training in the counselor education curriculum (Decker, 2013; Manis, 2008; Paylo, 2007). Yet the task of preparing counselors to be social justice advocates may also seem daunting in terms of resources

as universities confront limited and even reduced resources. However, there are several ways that advocacy instruction and practice can be infused throughout existing curricula.

Theory and Research Point to Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy has often served as the theoretical grounding for multicultural education, which is increasingly recognized as synergic with social justice advocacy (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). Lather (1998) described critical pedagogy as a “big tent” for all educational perspectives that have social justice as a goal (p. 498). Strategies grounded in critical pedagogy offer an intuitive fit for raising awareness of culture and the related societal dynamics of privilege and oppression among counselor trainees given the roots of the theory in civil and human rights movements (Brubaker et al., 2010; Enns & Forrest, 2005; Steele, 2008).

The essential feature of critical pedagogy is that it seeks to raise social consciousness and promote social action. Central to this process is the development of self-awareness relative to one’s social position and societal dynamics of privilege and oppression through dialogue and reflection (Chang & Gnilka, 2010; Freire, 1970). Evidence suggests that counselors in training should be guided to explore their cultural identities and related experiences of privilege and oppression to practice effectively (Enns & Forrest, 2005; Hays, Chang, & Dean, 2007; Manis, 2008).

The development of this social consciousness, or critical consciousness, is viewed as a process (Glossoff & Durham, 2010; Sleeter, Torres & Laughlin, 2004). In order to support students throughout this process, a developmental approach in which the educator facilitates activities to promote awareness and knowledge, then experience is recommended to empower students to become independent in their advocacy efforts (Bemak, Chung, Talleyrand, Jones, & Daquin, 2011; Marbley, Steele, & McAuliffe, 2011; Murray, Pope, & Rowell, 2010). Faculty

competence, modeling, and provision of support are essential to the process as students develop greater social consciousness and begin to practice advocacy skills (Brubaker et al., 2010; Decker, 2013; Glossoff & Durham, 2010; Sleeter, Torres & Laughlin, 2004).

The principles of critical pedagogy are congruent with the objectives of professional counseling and counselor education programs and provide a theoretical grounding for infusing advocacy education into already existing curricula. The continuum of development beginning with increased self-awareness and leading to social consciousness and social action theorized by Freire (1970) is consistent with a constructivist-developmental approach to counselor education (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Critical pedagogy posits that individuals develop social consciousness, and ultimately engage as social change agents through gaining self-awareness, as well as awareness of others through reflection and dialogue with others (Enns & Forrest, 2005). Quasi-experimental research with master's level counselor education students employing a brief, workshop intervention grounded in critical pedagogy resulted in student recognition of the synergy between cultural competence and social justice advocacy, or in Freirian terms, catalyzation of critical consciousness (Manis, 2008).

Critical pedagogy also emphasizes praxis or social justice advocacy in a manner that is congruent with the needs and culture of marginalized populations (Brubaker et al., 2010; Freire, 1970). Supervised practice in graduated steps of fieldwork offers ample opportunity for application and evaluation of advocacy skills and outcomes (Bemak et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2010; Rasheed Ali et al., 2008). Strategies and recommendations for infusing advocacy instruction and practice throughout the counselor education curriculum grounded within a critical pedagogical approach are presented below, beginning with the simple idea, supported by evidence that merely bringing a focus to advocacy can be a significant step (Paylo, 2007).

Infusing Advocacy into Counselor Education Programs

Many counselor education programs have already adopted an infusion approach to promoting multicultural competence (Dinsmore & England, 1996). Extending this infusion approach to include more explicit attention to how counselors may be alert to and assess for advocacy needs, integrate advocacy theories into their practice, and develop advocacy skills is needed. Infusion of advocacy in the counselor education curriculum should begin with students' orientation to the profession, permeate their coursework, and continue through supervised fieldwork.

Critical Strategies and Activities

There are several activities that can be incorporated across the didactic curriculum which are consistent with critical theory, and hold the potential to support the development of critical consciousness, as well as ethical and effective practice as advocates. Some are documented in the literature, and others are born from the authors' collective experience as faculty.

Address roles and mandates early and often. It is imperative to introduce students to the role of advocacy within the profession as a whole, and as it pertains to their counseling specialization (Hof, Dinsmore, Barber, Suhr, & Scofield, 2009; Miller et al., 2009; Paylo, 2007; Rasheed Ali et al., 2008). It is essential to their professional identity development that students recognize how the history of the profession is intertwined with social justice advocacy and counseling's focus on promoting optimal human development and wellness (King, 2012). In addition, students must develop an understanding of the development of the profession and how advocacy for the counseling profession is intertwined with advocacy for its clientele (Chang et al., 2012). Furthermore, introduction to the ethical codes and best practices guiding the

profession should be made immediately, and attended to in depth through coursework on professional ethics.

Foster multicultural awareness, knowledge and skill. Infusing attention to biopsychosocial considerations in addition to cultural awareness and skills into every aspect of counseling represents a critical step in counselor training that has been achieved by many programs. Yet according to Cates et al. (2007), and in our experience, similar attention to awareness and knowledge related to counselors' roles as leaders and advocates and competent advocacy practice is lacking. Similar to the infusion of cultural considerations across the curricula, attention may also be brought to advocacy considerations.

Courses that address multicultural competence may be most adaptable, thereby filling an existing gap in attention to culturally competent counseling skills. Including attention to identification of advocacy needs, advocacy strategies and challenges to advocacy in existing assignments like case analyses focused on application of MCT (Multicultural Counseling Therapy), class discussions, and personal reflections on becoming a counselor is easily accomplished and provides students with a more complete exercise for developing ethical practice. In this vein, it is also recommended that careful consideration to course names be considered to include attention to counselors' role in advocacy. For example, rather than referring to a course as "counseling diverse populations" consider "counseling and advocacy with diverse populations" which reflects the synergistic relationship between cultural competence and social justice advocacy.

Include social change and advocacy theories. While there is an opportunity to address MCT (Sue & Sue, 2008) within a multicultural counseling course, and as a meta-theoretical approach to counseling, it is important that additional attention is given to social change and

advocacy theories. Just as exploration and application of counseling theory touches on many aspects of a counseling curriculum, so should attention to social change and advocacy theories. It may be most important to introduce MCT along with empowerment and community engagement theories in the context of the theories course rather than exclusively in a counseling and advocacy with diverse populations course. This situates MCT as central to a professional counseling identity that promotes client wellness through a social and cultural perspective. Reflection and dialogue about theoretical grounding related to advocacy needs assessment and intervention should also be encouraged in the context of skills practice and fieldwork.

Incorporate reflective exercises. It is agreed that reflection of experience promotes self-awareness and the processing of learning opportunities (Tobin, Willow, Bastow, & Ratkowski, (2009). These can be short papers or even audio or video recordings in which students share their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and concerns as they process this new learning and experience. Recent evidence suggests unique benefits to the use of audio-visual reflection exercises, yet does not specifically address reflection on advocacy development (Parikh, Janson, & Singleton, 2012). One way to do this is to have students write their autobiography and then discuss the concepts of oppression, privilege, and power. Counselor educators can then ask students to rewrite their autobiography addressing these new variables (e.g., oppression, privilege) and ask students to compare and contrast the two autobiographies. Students could also write a biography for someone from a different culture or interview and spend time (e.g., 4 hours) with someone of a different culture, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or social economic status. Students could also read an autobiography of someone from a different culture and write a paper comparing and contrasting the experience of the subject to their own experiences.

Draw on modern media. To raise awareness of social injustice students could find stories or articles in the media that demonstrate oppression and share these stories as well as reflect on them in their own reflection papers. This activity can be extended using the Liberation Model proposed by Steele (2008). Within this model, students build on their basic knowledge of social issues within the classroom through research and collaboration using current professional counseling literature to identify themes related to societal issues. In groups, students identify a problem, research it beyond the counseling literature to look for broader views of the issues, and work together to develop and propose a plan that addresses the identified problem. This model encourages students to not only to look beyond the field of counseling, but also to think in broader terms about what is necessary to implement change on a societal level (Steele, 2008).

Invite guest lecturers. To increase students' awareness of situations and resources within their community, guest lecturers can be invited into the classroom. The intention is to have the individual discuss a need or an injustice within the community (e.g., SES issues, gay rights issues, access to care issues) that can be brought into the students' awareness. Students can then reflect through writing. This may include their own initial reaction to the information, their reactions after thinking about and researching the issue/situation, and their plan for what to do with this new knowledge as well as what can be done to aid or advocate for this issue/population. Guest speakers, case vignettes, and videos have been identified as positive learning experiences that increase knowledge of privilege and oppression (Hays, Dean, & Chang, 2007). Volunteering can also be an additional expectation or component of this idea, but will be more thoroughly discussed in the fieldwork section.

Assign real life advocacy work. An activity that encourages students to challenge systems of oppression and social injustice is to write letters to members of local, state, and

national government on an issue that motivates them to take social action. Many counselors do not advocate beyond the client level because they do not feel prepared for this type of advocacy (Gehart & Lucas, 2007; Roysircar, 2009; Steele, 2008). By providing this preparation within the counselor education program, students will learn the skills necessary to locate the information and resources to advocate for an issue at the societal level while also gaining increased knowledge of public policy and the political system (Murray et al., 2010). This activity can be used early in the program to introduce students to advocacy at this level and used again when students are more advanced in their program and have found issues they feel passionate to change. Additionally, instructors can have students attend state legislative days either as a part of a classroom assignment or as an extra-credit opportunity.

Another option for incorporating advocacy experiences is to allow students to present on a topic that addresses a need within their community (e.g., homelessness, poverty). This presentation should highlight the oppression, privilege, and power connected with that issue and resources that are lacking and/or obstacles that are hindering this population. Additionally, this presentation could be taped and edited into a three to five minute video, which could then be sent to people with power or stakeholders within that community (e.g., legislators, superintendents, committee members).

Incorporate case studies. Case studies and films that highlight issues of oppression can be used within the classroom to help students identify systems of oppression and privilege and develop advocacy skills (Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009). In using a case study, students can identify themes of oppression and privilege. The educator should encourage the student to brainstorm and theorize how they would advocate for the client(s) at the individual, community,

and societal level. These learned skills can then be further refined when conceptualizing cases while in fieldwork courses.

Incorporate experiential learning. The inclusion of a carefully planned experiential learning component as part of a counselor preparation program leads to a higher degree of comfort and increased commitment to social justice advocacy (Bemak et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2010; Rasheed Ali et al., 2008). Experiential learning activities provide students with the opportunity to apply the material they are learning to real world situations. Benefits of this educational tool include increased advocacy competence, self-efficacy, and self-awareness. Also, students who have participated in experiential learning experiences report increased awareness about oppressive systems, barriers to change, and practical advocacy strategies (Bemak et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2010; Rasheed Ali et al., 2008). Ethical consideration must be given regarding the potential benefits to clients and communities, as well as to advocacy training practices.

There are different models for incorporating experiential learning in counselor preparation programs. Murray et al. (2010) described service-learning projects that are attached to specific courses within the counselor education program. In this model, students are exposed to various experiences at specific developmental levels throughout their program. Rasheed Ali et al. (2008) provided a model for incorporating a service-learning project into a career interventions course. The course builds a three-week service project into the context of the course giving students the opportunity to learn about theory and then apply the learning in real world situations. Jett and Delgado-Romero (2009) offered an approach to counselor preparation that utilizes pre-practicum service learning (PPSL). A PPSL requires students to do outreach and provide a service within the community to meet the needs of the individuals within that

community. When requiring a service learning component it is important that the activities are appropriate to the developmental level of the trainee, provide clear objectives and instructions, and offer a balance between the academic requirements and the service component (Murray et al., 2010; Rasheed Ali et al., 2008).

Incorporate volunteering. Goodman, Liang, Helms, Latta, Sparks, and Weintraub (2004) provided a model for incorporating advocacy instruction into counseling programs. Based on the principles of feminist and multicultural counseling theories, they implemented a program at Boston College that integrated social justice work into the doctoral program in counseling psychology that could be easily adapted for students in a Master's level counselor education program. As part of the requirements, students must spend six hours each week working in a variety of community sites engaged in professional development, prevention, collaboration, and advocacy. The authors found that many students continued their volunteer work beyond the requirement and noted that the students gained experiences with advocacy, which helped to promote both competency and feelings of self-efficacy. In alignment with Decker's (2013) more recent findings, Goodman et al. hypothesized that this would promote ongoing engagement in advocacy efforts upon their entry to the field.

Fieldwork Supervision

In order to support supervisors in their efforts to provide supervisees with a strong foundation for social justice and advocacy, Glosoff and Durham (2010) offered specific strategies that can be used in supervision. They suggested that supervisors use Bloom's taxonomy to assess what level supervisees are at in discussions of social justice issues and structure discussions to meet supervisees at this level and assist them to move to higher or lower levels as appropriate. Additionally, these authors indicated supervisors must be deliberate and

consistent in initiating discussions of power and privilege. Often supervision focuses on case review, and it can be easy to miss these discussions if they have not been scheduled into the supervision sessions. Finally, supervisors should provide opportunities for supervisees to reflect on practices in order to identify systems of power, privilege and oppression encountered by their clients. Reflective practices may include case review and conceptualization that encourages supervisees to identify systems of oppression and develop advocacy strategies and action plans (Glosoff & Durham, 2010; Hays, Dean & Chang, 2007).

One additional consideration for counselor education programs is to evaluate the type of supervision being provided by their internship site supervisors. Counselor education programs should consider providing professional development opportunities for internship site supervisors on the rationale, behaviors, skills, and knowledge for advocating for clients on the individual, community, and societal level. Providing this type of training, along with the university supervisor practicing social justice sensitive supervision, would provide counselors in training with a consistent and uniformed approach to the implementation of advocacy and social justice counseling.

Continuing Education for Faculty

These strategies and recommendations place responsibility for advocacy instruction as well as supervision of advocacy work on counselor educators, therefore relying on them to be knowledgeable, competent, and committed to social justice advocacy practices. However, Ratts and Wood (2011) indicated that a factor contributing to counselor education programs not providing social justice advocacy training is that there is a lack of training among the faculty. Decker (2013) found that only slightly more than half of the counselor educators who participated in a study of social justice advocacy in counselor education programs reported

having any master's or post-master's training in social justice advocacy. It cannot be assumed that all counselor educators are knowledgeable, competent, and committed to social justice advocacy practices.

As professional mandates have come about in the last 10 years, some counselor educators and supervisors may not have had this training as part of their doctoral studies and may not feel prepared to do this type of advocacy training without continuing education and professional development. This will be another area that counselor education programs will need to address as they move forward with infusing social justice advocacy instruction and supervision into their programs.

Conclusion

As the counseling profession calls all counselors to act as social justice advocates, it is imperative that they are prepared to meet this role without hesitation or reservation. This places the burden of responsibility on counselor education programs. Therefore, counselor education programs must infuse advocacy and social justice instruction throughout their curricula (i.e., didactic courses, fieldwork, professional development). For a program to meet this challenge, bringing all faculty members within a department into this charge is important to assuring consistency and continuity (Bemak et al, 2011; Lewis, Lenski, Mukhopadhyay & Cartwright, 2010). Although this is a significant undertaking that will require leadership and commitment, it is necessary and warranted if our desire as a field is to align with our historic roots, embrace our distinct orientation toward growth, development and wellness, and prepare future counselors across the counseling specializations to be social justice advocates.

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