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Jelane A. Kennedy

The College of Saint Rose, KENNEDYJ@mail.strose.edu


Wendy Neifeld Wheeler

The College of Saint Rose

Stephanie Bennett

The College of Saint Rose

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An Exploratory Study of Classroom Diversity and Cultural Competency

Abstract

This exploratory study compares the effectiveness of multicultural training across two classrooms of counselors-in-training at a predominately white institution—one which was homogenous in class composition; the other which was diverse in class composition. Results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between classrooms and that individual students demonstrated statistically significant change in perceived multicultural competence. Such findings highlight the need for ongoing research that explores influence of classroom composition on cultural competency training for counseling graduate students.

Author's Notes

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Keywords

cultural competency, classroom composition, multicultural competence, counselor education

For over three decades, the field of counselor education has been working to develop ways to help emerging professionals become more culturally competent. Sue's et al. (1982) position paper on cross-cultural counseling competencies has been repeatedly noted as serving as the initial impetus for valuing multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills (Kim & Lyons, 2003; Ponterotto, Alexander & Grieger, 1995). The significance of multicultural understanding and sensitivity has also been formally acknowledged by the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014) and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009).

The paradigm shift away from utilizing a monocultural approach to counseling has influenced how educators assist counselors-in-training in the development of skills to work successfully within a culturally diverse community (Cartwright, Daniels, & Zhang, 2008; King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). This mindset also has been influenced by the changes in U.S. demographics, particularly the growing number of racial and ethnic minorities (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2010). Counselors and educators both have recognized that these individuals may have unique needs in the counseling relationship (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998; Smith, Rodriguez & Bernal, 2011), while noting that the level of training emerging counselors receive regarding multicultural competency has been less than adequate (Smith, et al., 2011; Zalaquett, Foley, Tilotson, Dinsmore, & Hoff, 2008). In 1991, Lewis and Hayes stated, "As educators we have a responsibility to lead students to a heightened awareness of the importance of being empathetic and skilled in the realm of cross-cultural counseling" (p. 124). Twenty years later, Mattar (2011) again affirms that "a more diverse, culturally and linguistically competent and well-trained workforce" is needed to successfully engage today's diverse populations (p. 259).

Kiselica (1998) reported that students who enter the graduate school classroom may be at the early stages of cross-cultural development and may have an insufficiently developed multicultural lens. Students in King and Howard-Hamilton's study (2003) reported that "they are eager to gain more experience and skills in this area [intercultural experience] through their graduate preparation" (p. 129). Educators and faculty frequently respond to these varying degrees of progress by examining personal teaching methodologies, texts, supplemental reading materials and curriculum content (Reynolds, 1995; Zalaquett et al., 2008).

An additional and more challenging element to understand is the impact class composition has on the learning environment (Reynolds, 1995). Participants in Herdlein's (2004) study reported that increased opportunities for students to listen and speak with diverse populations may enhance multicultural proficiency. Abreu, Gim Chung, and Atkinson (2000) and Zalaquett, et al. (2008) argue that counseling programs should strive for a more diversified composition of students and faculty in order to have the greatest influence on multicultural development. Furthermore, Kelly & Gayles (2010) state, "The type and nature of opportunities graduate students have to interact with and dialog about cultural difference is key to preparing professionals who are prepared for multiculturally demanding positions" (p. 78). Additional research suggests that both interpersonal discussions between white students and students of color and the inclusion of culturally diverse guest speakers have an impact on students' development of cultural competence (Heppner & O'Brien, 1994; Tomlinson-Clarke, 2000). Junn (1994) summarized:

deepening students' multicultural knowledge and awareness affords them the potential of critically viewing the work and themselves from multiple, complex, and interrelated perspectives. It is precisely this heightened sense of self in relation to other, more global

context that sets the stage for potentially powerful insights and possibilities as those students set out to navigate both their professional and personal worlds (p. 130).

Purpose of Present Study

The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to examine whether increased student diversity at a predominately white institution (PWI) in the classroom would have an impact on students' development of cultural competency. The investigators assessed whether students enrolled in one of two matched courses that had varied class composition (as it related to diversity) demonstrated a greater amount of improvement in cultural competency at the conclusion of a multicultural training course.

The hypotheses were:

H₁: There is a statistically significant change between individual students' level of cultural competence (awareness, knowledge and skills) from the beginning of the semester of the Social and Cultural Foundations course to the end of the semester;

H₂: There is a statistically significant difference in between Class A (class composition not diverse) and Class B (class composition diverse) in cultural competency (awareness, knowledge and skills) measured at the end of the semester.

H₃: The amount of improvement demonstrated at the end of the semester on multicultural competencies of Class B (class composition diverse) would be statistically significant from the amount of improvement from Class A at the end of the semester.

Method

Sample

A total of 39 students were enrolled in the two classes; one student dropped the class, one student did not fully complete the assessments, and two students chose not to participate in the study. Participants were 35 students (31 women and 4 men) enrolled in one of two parallel graduate level multicultural courses. The program does not use a cohort model. The principal investigator taught both sections of the Social and Cultural Foundations class utilizing the same syllabus, textbooks and course activities. One class was primarily homogeneous (Class A) and the second class was more heterogeneous (Class B) in class composition. All students were enrolled at a small private liberal arts college in the Northeast and were pursuing Master's degrees in counseling and college student affairs programs. A convenience sample was used; students through course registration self-selected into one of the two sections of the class as it met the students' scheduling needs. Information about the research project was introduced following the official drop/add period. The students represented four programs (School Counseling, Mental Health: Community, Mental Health: College and College Student Affairs).

The Social and Cultural Foundations Course

The two classes met for 2.5 hours once a week over 15 weeks for a total of 37.5 hours of instructional time. Both classes followed the identical format with homework assignments, guest speakers, DVDs, readings from textbooks and classroom activities [i.e. small and large group discussion, lecture and a cultural simulation (Neville et al., 1996)]. The students were asked to select a focus group for the semester. The focus group was to be different from the student in some way (i.e. race, religion, sexual orientation) and was vetted with the instructor through

conversation for each class. As a writing intensive class, the students completed weekly reflective journals and awareness activities; three guided interaction papers related to the focus group choice each interaction required high levels of contact with the focus group; a book report that the students shared with classmates related to the focus group; a prescribed culture paper that asked students to compare and contrast personal views on one's own culture with cultural and religious specific readings in two of the required textbooks; and a final guided reflection paper that assessed overall growth as a more culturally competent professional. The first three classes emphasized building rapport, creating a safe environment, and setting ground rules for the class (Ramsey, 1999). This was done with icebreaker activities that explored cultural sameness and differences. In the two of the three classes, students generated ground rules for creating a safe space that would be used through out the semester.

This course was designed to promote an awareness of one's own cultural biases, to expand the knowledge base about different cultural groups, to enhance practical and professional skills to make culturally appropriate interventions, and to encourage basic to complex immersion opportunities. The instructor comes from a multiculturalist and feminist teaching point of view. This foundation has guided the course curriculum content which has expanded beyond the traditional four racial minority groups and discussions on white privilege to include topics related to sexual orientation, gender, religion, class/socioeconomic status, national origin and disability status (Priester, et al. 2008; Smith-Adcock, Ropers-Huilman & Choate, 2004).

The instructor of the class was a seasoned professor who had designed and taught the class for 13 years. The instructor's research interests have included the impact of classroom diversity on the learning environment, and individual student's progress in multicultural education. In respect for full disclosure the instructor identifies as: European American, female, and as a lesbian.

Demographics

The students in both classes attend a PWI. Students enrolled in Class A (N=19), the more homogenous class were 95% female (n=18) and 5% male (n=1). The age the participants ranged from 20-35 years old; 20-24 (68%, n=13), 25-29 (26%, n=5) and 30-35 (5%, n=1). The 19 participants self identified as 89% (n=17) European American and 11% (n=2) as students of color. In examining religion 84% (n=16) identified as Christian, and 16% (n=3) as non-Christian. In regard to sexual orientation 95% (n=18) identified as heterosexual and 5% (n= 1) a sexual minority.

Students enrolled in Class B (N=16), the more heterogeneous class, were 81% female (n=13) and 18% male (n=3). The age the participants ranged from 20-35 years old; 20-24 (76%, n=12), 25-29 (19%, n=3) and 30-35 (6%, n=1). The 16 participants self identified as 69% (n=11) European American and 31% (n=5) as students of color. In examining religion 69% (n=11) identified as Christian, and 31% (n=5) as non-Christian. In regard to sexual orientation 100% (n=16) identified as heterosexual.

It is important to note that the number of participants that self-identified from each racial/ethnic, religious, and sexual orientation category was too small to conduct useful analysis so this data was collapsed into dichotomous variables. The demographics were divided into groupings of those who identified with characteristics of the dominant culture (i.e. European American, Christian and heterosexual), and those who did not (i.e. students of color, non-Christian [Jewish, Muslim, non-believers, no religious upbringing and atheist] and sexual minority [bisexual, gay/lesbian and transgendered]). Age and gender were not collapsed.

Instrument

D'Andrea, Daniels & Heck (1991) created the MAKSS-C to assess student's multicultural competence. The MAKSS-C was chosen over the MAKSS-CE-R after consultation with the first author of the instrument (M. D'Andrea, personal communication, February 10, 2009) The MAKSS-C and MAKSS-CE-R are measures that were developed to assess the multicultural counseling competencies based on the model of cross-cultural counseling by Sue et al. (1982). Additionally, the MAKSS-C is longer than MAKSS-CE-R, and was described as better suited for use with students as a tool to measure competencies and develop students' own self-awareness. The MAKSS-CE-R was described as better utilized as a research tool—not for self-assessment, and by using the MAKSS-C, students would continue to gain the benefit of thinking about their own sense of self-awareness. The MAKSS-C has 60 items that give a total score and three subscale scores. The three subscales: Awareness (20 items), Knowledge (20 items) and Skills (20 items). Students respond by using three different 4-point Likert scales. Students are considered to have higher competencies if their score is higher in each subscale.

The MAKSS-C has been found to be a reliable and valid measure of multicultural competency. The reliability coefficients were obtained by using Cronbach's alpha, Awareness: .75, Knowledge: .90, and Skills: .96 (D'Andrea et al., 1991).

Procedure

Once approval from the college's institutional review board on human studies was obtained, the principal investigator introduced the study to the two classes. Students were informed that participation was voluntary, that the students were free to refuse participation, and that participation would not affect students' grades negatively or positively. The students also were informed that they could withdraw from the study at anytime without adverse affects on final grades in the class. Students demonstrated their agreement by signing an informed consent form that included age and program of study. Students who agreed to participate allowed the investigator to collect their pre-test and post-test MAKSS-C and to utilize their written work (culture papers) to gain demographic information about the students. Utilizing the culture paper to collect demographic information would allow students to express freely how they identified themselves. Students also knew that if the information given in the culture papers was not clear, the principal investigator would meet with the student to address any confusion as how the student identified.

Results

Study data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and t-tests. To examine the effect of diverse class composition on multicultural competencies, differences in pre- and posttest scores on the MAKSS-C were compared. For all means, higher scores indicate self-reporting of higher levels of multicultural competency. The range of possible points on each subscale is 20-80 points.

All students in classes A and B self-reported improvement in their scores in each of the MAKSS-C subscales. Students in Class A (n=19) demonstrated a significant difference in all three subscales from the beginning of the 15-week course to the end of the class: Awareness (t=2.95; df=18; p<.05); Knowledge (t=4.86; df=18; p<.05); Skills (t=5.99; df=18; p<.05).

Students in Class B (n=16) also demonstrated a significant difference in all three subscales from the beginning of the class to the end of the class: Awareness (t=5.75; df=15; p<.05); Knowledge (t=6.03; df=15; p<.05); Skills (t=6.04; df=15; p<.05).

A t-test analysis was conducted to describe the differences between the two classes both at pre- and posttest. Since the students in the existing sample were members of two intact groups, their answers on measures of the dependent variables might have varied systematically at pretest because of their group association. In examining the analysis between the two classes at pretest, no significant differences were found for any of the three subscales. Comparison between Class A and Class B of the MAKSS-C posttest scores were statistically significant for each of the subscales: Awareness (t = -2.377, p<.05), Knowledge (t = -2.851, p<.01) and Skills (t = -2.814, p<.01) (refer to Table 1).

Table 1

Difference in Pretest and Posttest Means between Class A and Class B (n=35)

Competence	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	95% CI for Mean	
				Upper	Lower
Awareness					
Pretest	-.477	1.779	-.268	-4.096	3.142
Posttest	-5.132	2.159	-2.377*	-9.530	-.733
Knowledge					
Pretest	-1.441	2.891	-.498	-7.330	4.449
Posttest	-6.352	2.228	-2.851**	-10.892	-1.812
Skills					
Pretest	-3.026	2.466	-1.227	-8.044	1.992
Posttest	-5.852	2.080	-2.814**	-10.092	-1.612

* = p>.05

**=p>.01

Independent t-tests were also performed to investigate whether the amount of difference in students' scores between pre- and posttest differed significantly on any of the measures of the dependent variables. Although students in both classes improved their scores on the MAKSS-C between the beginning and the end of the semester, and it appears that scores for Class B seem to have a larger change, no significant difference was found between the amount the change between Class A and Class B on the Awareness subscale ($t = .107, p < .05$) the Knowledge subscale ($t = .119, p < .05$), or the Skills subscale ($t = .369, p < .05$). This data is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Differences in Posttest Scores between Class A and Class B (n=35)

Competence	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	95% CI for Mean	
				Upper	Lower
Awareness	-4.655	2.805	-1.659	-10.363	1.054
Knowledge	-4.911	3.068	-1.600	-11.159	1.336
Skills	-2.826	3.098	-.912	-9.150	3.499

* = $p > .05$

Limits

Some limitations should be considered with respect to the findings of this study. First, it is imperative to acknowledge that becoming a culturally competent counselor is an ongoing process. A one-semester multicultural training course may serve as a partial component of long-term multicultural development, but that enduring improvement cannot be confirmed as part of a 15-week course. Second, the use of a non-randomized convenience sample with representation of participants from only one institution impacts the ability to generalize the results. Third, because only self-reported data was collected, it is possible that students may have inflated their responses due to social desirability. Self-reported responses may also reflect anticipated rather than actual behaviors and attitudes. Fourth, small sample size meant the variables had to be reported as dichotomous (dominate culture vs. non-dominant culture) and not as individual variables. Fifth, the youthful age of the class compositions may have been impacted by students still in emerging adulthood and not be representative of all counselor education programs. Finally, as previously noted the principal investigator was the instructor of both classes; while this may have assisted with consistency between the classes, it may have also impacted how students self-reported on the assessment instrument. Additionally, the principal investigator was aware of potential bias and utilized journaling, colleague consultation and vigilant self-awareness.

Discussion

The study sought to examine if the diversity of the classroom composition had an impact on cultural competence. The results indicate that the class content as it was designed appears to enhance cultural competence for all students regardless of race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. It did not matter which of the two classes the students were enrolled in for a statistically significant difference between the pre-MAKSS-C and the post-MAKSS-C to be observed. This confirmed the researchers' prediction that there would be a statistically significant change between individual students' level of cultural competence (awareness, knowledge and skills) from the beginning of the semester of the course to the end of the semester. At pre-test, it was also confirmed that there was no significant difference between Class A and B.

When Class A and Class B were compared to see if Class B's mean post-test scores were significantly different on the post-MAKSS-C from Class A, it was found that there was statistically significant difference. This confirmed the researchers' prediction that there would be a statistically significant difference in between Class A and Class B in cultural competency (awareness, knowledge and skills) measured at the end of the semester. It is important to note that the magnitude of the difference was not statistically significant. The researchers cannot conclude that class composition primarily influenced the difference in the post-test scores. This raises the question regarding the minimal critical mass needed to have both the classroom environment and the class content impact multicultural competence (Abreu et al., 2000).

Reynolds (1995) suggested examining the impact of student composition in the classroom as an important area for research. It is hoped that the differences between the scores of the students in the more heterogeneous class and the students in the more homogeneous class is due to classroom composition. Abreu et al. (2000) indicated that a critical mass of 30% minority representation was needed to support enhanced multiculturalism in an academic program. It would seem then that 30% non-dominant group representation in the classroom would also

promote multiculturalism. In this study the threshold of 30% non-dominant group representation was met and resulted in a statistically significant change in scores, but the magnitude of change was not significant. More investigation is needed examining critical mass. There seems to be a need for further research regarding how a higher percentage of classroom diversity may or may not impact the design of course content and structure of classes. Qualitative research to further assess this may provide additional insight. There may be more innovative ways that educators may be able to take advantage of the teachable moment that increased diversity presents in the classroom. Other questions arise on how the training needs of the dominant culture students and those outside the dominant culture are met. Are they mutually exclusive or overlapping?

In several areas of literature, there have been discussions of the needs of dominant culture students (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1999; Neville et al., 1996). One long-standing issue has been trainee resistance, specifically White students' resistance to racial/ethnic issues and the need to find a balance between the challenges and support that is offered in the classroom. Kiselica (1998) also offered that White students might find it helpful to work with a White faculty member serving as a role model as it pertains to multicultural issues and the development of culturally competent practice. For students of color, the identified challenges include: colleagues who are not as interested in multicultural issues, faculty who are uncomfortable with multicultural issues, and the potential differences between developmental progress of students of color and their dominant cultural counterparts (Auletta & Jones, 1994; Rooney, Flores, & Mercier 1998; Zalaquett et al., 2008). Coleman (2006) states:

faculty ... may want to pay particular attention to including a balance of didactic and experiential components related to race and ethnicity (for students of color) with less structured activities that facilitate White students' critical interactions with their racial/ethnic minority colleagues." (p. 180)

Chao, Wie, Good and Flores (2011) suggest that there may be a need to develop differential education for White students and students of color. At minimum, looking at the impact of co-teaching multicultural competency classes with a faculty member of color and a White faculty member could offer some interesting insights. There may be ways to be more purposeful in classroom management that would encourage more inter-cultural dialogue with students or to look more closely at the ways in which faculty create moments for inter-cultural dialogue.

In many cases, cultural diversity classes may be an introduction to issues of diversity. More programs using an integrated model of cultural diversity training may help increase knowledge and facilitate more longitudinal studies. After taking a multicultural course, students may or may not continue to develop their cultural competencies as they complete the program and pursue internship. There may be an optimal time in which students need to explore who they are as cultural beings. Chao et al., (2011) suggest that there maybe a ceiling effect that occurs during pre-service training. The profession may need work with professional associations and licensure boards to address post-training continuing education and professional development as it relates to culturally competent practice.

Another important area to examine is how the use of a broader definition of cultural competency to include not only race/ethnicity, but also religion, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and disability can impact students. The level of inclusivity may allow students to connect with each other and to have a place where they may challenge themselves to explore their own cultural competency. Examining multiple kinds of privilege may allow students to develop a more holistic understanding of what it means to live and work in a diverse society.

Although this study did not examine students' innate interest in cultural competency as students enter programs counselor educators may consider their level of motivation in serving a diverse population. Understanding what inspires students to explore and be open to diversity may help counselor educators to unlock students' resistance to developing cultural competency and ultimately lead them to be better advocates.

As Chao et al. (2011) suggested, multicultural competency requires professionals to actively engage in ongoing deep reflection. Students' willingness to deconstruct personal biases requires maturity and developmental readiness. The journey to multicultural competence is a lifelong process that continues well after the student has received a diploma, and ultimately students will choose to use those skills in daily practice.

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