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## Promoting Awareness of Self: Cultural Immersion and Service-Learning Experiences of Counselors-in-Training

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# Promoting Awareness of Self: Cultural Immersion and Service-Learning Experiences of Counselors-in-Training

## **Abstract**

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## Abstract

Counselor education is committed to exploring innovative pedagogy to provide opportunities for counselor trainees to increase multicultural competence. International cultural immersion and service-learning create an environment for counselors-in-training to explore their cultural competence through cultural interactions, relationships, and heightened self-awareness. This exploratory, qualitative, phenomenological study using focus group data collection investigated the lived experience of counselors-in-training through international cultural immersion and service-learning. Awareness-of-self emerged as the overarching theme which included themes of personal and national privilege, cultural encapsulation, sense of belonging, and racism. Subthemes include attitudes and beliefs, cultural norms, time, gender roles, community vs. individualism, intra-group differences, and intra-community racism. Findings can serve to inform counselor educators on the use of international service-learning and cultural immersion as pedagogy for advancing self-awareness and multicultural competence.

## **Keywords**

multicultural competence, social justice, service learning, cultural immersion, counselor-in-training, person-of-the counselor

As the population of the United States becomes more diverse and we aspire to increase the internationalization of higher education, counselor multicultural competence will be of continued importance among counselor educators. Counselor preparation programs have been seeking new and innovative methods, most notably through cultural immersion experiences, to enhance counselor-in-training multicultural competence to create culturally competent practitioners (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Bleicher & Correia, 2011; Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Consoli, Grazioso, & Lopez, 2006; Middleton, Erguner-Tekinalp, Williams, Stadler, & Dow, 2011). Investigating best practices in pedagogy for the profession through research that explores approaches extending beyond the classroom, most notably through service-learning and cultural immersion programs, could present as an effective method to nurture multicultural competence in counselor educators (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Bleicher & Correia, 2011; Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Burnett et al., 2004; Consoli et al., 2006; Middleton et al., 2011).

According to Satcher's (2001) report on culture, race, and ethnicity, there is a gap in access to and availability of mental health services for racial and ethnic populations. Research indicated that the gap in mental health services stems from barriers such as mistrust, fear of treatment, racism, discrimination, and differences in language and communication between client and counselor (Ahmed, Wilson, Henriksen, & Jones 2011; Day-Vines et al., 2007; Goebert, 2014; Huang et al., 2005; Satcher, 2001; Wahowiak, 2015). Huang et al. (2005) indicates that if racially and ethnically diverse clients start mental health services, they may quickly drop out because they feel their providers do not understand them. Lack of understanding and cultural competency can result in misdiagnosis, which has been shown to negatively affect certain racial and ethnic populations (Goebert, 2014; Huang et al., 2005; Satcher, 2001; Wahowiak, 2015). Misdiagnosis

can stem from cultural differences in interpretation of mental health amongst diverse groups and lack of understanding of how diverse populations use culturally traditional medicines and methods to address mental health needs. Additionally, a lack of knowledge and understanding regarding the perceptions of some ethnic or minority groups about seeking support or help outside of the family can also lead to misdiagnosis (Goebert, 2014; Huang et al, 2005; Satcher, 2001; Wahowiak, 2015).

### **Multicultural Competence and Self-Awareness**

The therapeutic relationship is seen as an important common factor significantly influencing the counseling process (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999) with the person-of-the-counselor serving as the most important instrument for change (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999; Baldwin, 1987; Burnett et al., 2004; Consoli et al., 2006; Middleton et al., 2011; Platt, 2012). The person-of-the-counselor refers to the engagement of the therapist's *self* in the therapeutic relationship. Engagement in the therapeutic relationship requires mental health counselors to pay attention to their inner selves (thoughts, biases, misperceptions) and come to recognize that personal experiences, feelings, and thinking, as well as biases, will influence clinical work (Wosket, 1999). The personal exploration of lived experiences as well as understanding one's own humanness allows counselors to relate more fully and with greater empathy to clients (Yalom, 2003).

Counselors' increased knowledge of self and greater access to emotions enhances their use of self in the therapeutic relationship (Aponte et al., 2009; Bachelor & Horvath, 2006; Baldwin, 1987). Through engagement in reflexive behavior, taking account of oneself and the effect of one's presence within a situation, understanding of awareness of self and bias can increase. This in turn can serve to liberate the self to be open with free, conscious attention to focus on clients with clarity, hope, and connection (Aponte et al., 2009), which may foster

multicultural competence (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016). Effective therapeutic relationships between counselor and client include addressing barriers which could affect client participation and retention in the counseling process (Ahmed et al., 2011; Day-Vines et al., 2007; Huang et al., 2005; Satcher, 2001; Sue & Sue, 2013; Wahowiak, 2015). Multiculturally competent counselor practitioners are necessary in schools, agencies, and communities to provide effective counseling services to diverse groups of people (Ahmed et al., 2011; Day-Vines et al., 2007; Huang et al., 2005; Satcher, 2001; Sue & Sue, 2013; Wahowiak, 2015).

Multicultural counseling competency includes counselor awareness of one's own cultural values and biases, awareness of clients' worldviews, and use of culturally appropriate interventions and strategies that focus on the unique needs and qualities of the populations served (Arredondo, Tovar-Blank et al., 1996; Day-Vines et al., 2007; Locke & Bailey, 2014; Sue & Sue, 2013). Ratts et al. (2016) created a framework for such competencies, the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC), and it operates from the perspective of examining counselors' attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, and skills to address client needs. According to the MSJCC framework, self-awareness includes consciousness of social identities, social group statuses, power, privilege, oppression, strengths, limitations, assumptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and biases. Reflective practice is a vital tool for creating self-understanding and is a long-standing aspect of experiential learning in counselor education. During service-learning experiences, it creates a pathway for counselors-in-training to gain self-awareness and strengthen their cultural identity (Bleicher & Correia, 2011; Burnett et al., 2004).

Bleicher and Correia (2011) believed reflection exposed the essence of the service-learning experience and connected ideas of the human inner world and the outside world of

experience. When reflection guides participants to develop new understanding, service-learning experiences become educational and informative which, in turn, leads to increased knowledge and more informed action. Effective reflection often takes many forms and involves the interplay of emotion and cognition in which people intentionally connect service experiences with learning objectives (Bleicher & Correia, 2011). A variety of venues, including personal reflection, group processing, and formal focus groups, allow students the time for quiet, thoughtful, and interactive reflective contemplation. When graduate counseling students are immersed in a new and different culture, reflective practice cultivates opportunities to examine moments of meaning.

### **Cultural Immersion as Pedagogy for Multicultural Competence**

Training for multicultural competence includes approaching the counseling process from the context of the personal culture of the client. The American Counseling Association (2014) Code of Ethics helps to ensure that counselor values and biases do not supersede those of the client. Inclusive of training for multicultural competence is investigating the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that counselors-in-training need to become effective practitioners. Addressing cultural factors in the counseling process enhances counselor credibility and improves the counseling relationship (Ahmed et al., 2011; Arredondo et al., 1996; Day-Vines et al., 2007; Locke & Bailey, 2014; Sue & Sue, 2013).

How to train for cultural competency varies with education and programs. To promote ethical practices of effective service to diverse populations, counselors need to become knowledgeable of the changing racial and ethnic compositions of the United States population and the issues and challenges that they face (Sheely-Moore & Kooyman, 2011). In an earlier study, Day-Vines et al. (2007) suggested broaching as a process of listening for the relevance of culture and explicitly introducing the intersection and influence of race, ethnicity, age, and sexual

orientation as part of the presenting concerns for clients. Data from the literature also suggest other interventions to address cultural competency, including investigating and reflecting on one's own perceptions and assumptions about race, ethnicity, and diversity and participating in varied learning opportunities through cultural immersion and service-learning (Ahmed et al., 2011; Arredondo et al., 1996; Day-Vines et al., 2007; Locke & Bailey, 2014; Ratts et al., 2016; Sue & Sue, 2013). The literature includes findings from service-learning research indicating that it is one strategy for introducing cultural competency (awareness, knowledge, and skills) to counselors-in-training. The advantages of service learning include direct exposure to diverse cultural groups in various environments (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Bleicher & Correia, 2011; Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Burnett et al., 2004; Consoli et al., 2006; Middleton et al., 2011).

The design and implementation of global service-learning and cultural immersion experiences have evolved over time. Over the last five decades, service-learning has advanced from emphasizing individual awareness of cultural differences (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002) to include a structured academic experience involving a global learning perspective (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011, as cited in Garcia & Longo, 2013). Service-learning experiences are prime opportunities for counselors-in-training to apply theoretical concepts to real-world scenarios. Likewise, the literature is rich with program-specific examples of successful service- and cross-cultural learning experiences targeting specific sub-populations of the college environment (Hutchinson, 2011; Krentzman & Townsend, 2008; Taggart & Crisp, 2011). Among the numerous positive benefits to counselors-in-training, immersion education plays an important role in training future clinicians by supplementing current pedagogical training practices with experiential opportunities to work with others in an increasing global society (Platt, 2012). Through service-learning and cultural immersion, knowledge can be constructed through

participants' lived experiences (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Bleicher & Correia, 2011; Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Burnett et al., 2004; Consoli et al., 2006; Middleton et al., 2011).

### **Method**

The intent of the study is to investigate the lived experience of counselors in training who engaged in international cultural immersion and service learning. This study employed an exploratory, qualitative, phenomenological methodology using focus group data collection. Phenomenology calls for an intentional experience of the world around us with the primary focus of exploring “the essence of a particular...lived experience” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 88). Cultural immersion trips are one type of intentional experience planned and organized around creating a lived experience that is unique from the everyday. To experience the world, we must want to *know* the world, and for this to occur we must first *be* in the world and, finally, *become* the world (van Manen, 1990). Because there is strong evidence that cultural immersion contributes to counselors-in-training enhanced multicultural competence (Burnett et al., 2004; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010), the researchers were curious as to how this occurs. Therefore, the research question for our inquiry is: What is the lived experience of counselors-in-training who have participated in international cultural immersion service-learning?

### **Participants and Design**

All graduate students enrolled in the Department of Counseling were invited to participate in an eight-day service-learning cultural immersion trip to a Caribbean nation. During two information sessions and several follow-up emails, faculty informed students about the present study including travel requirements, intent of service-learning and cultural immersion, and expectations. Those who agreed to participate signed the informed consent.

Eleven clinical mental health counseling graduate students and one social work graduate



student elected to participate in the travel. The social work graduate student volunteered to participate in the program following a conversation that she had with one of the counseling graduate students. The group was comprised of three African American females, seven Caucasian females, one Jamaican American male, and one African American male. All travelers self-selected to be study participants. Participants' ages ranged from 24-28, with the faculty researchers' ages of 53 and 57. Table 1 provides a snapshot of the demographic characteristics of the participants. Participants were immersed in the culture by living in homes with host families which offered them an opportunity to have meals and share time with family members. They also participated in service-learning, which included working with teachers and students in the schools (i.e., art work, reading, play) and providing seminars and lectures on autism education to parents, teachers, and community members. They attended evening lectures on Caribbean culture, family life and education, as well as a cooking demonstration, community organization meetings, and a cultural pageant.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Identification	Previous International Travel	Race	Sex	Specialization
A	No	European -American	Female	CSP
B	Yes	European -American	Female	CSP
C	Yes	European -American	Female	SC
D	No	European -American	Female	SC
E	No	European -American	Female	SW
F	No	African-American	Female	CMHC
G	No	African-American	Female	CMHC
H	Yes	European-American	Female	CMHC
I	Yes	European-American	Female	CC
J	Yes	Jamaican-American	Male	SC
K	Yes	African-American	Male	CSP
L	No	African-American	Female	CMHC

*Note.* CSP-College Student Personnel, SC-School Counseling, CMCH-Clinical Mental Health Counseling, CC-College Counseling, SW-Social Work

**Data Collection Cultural Immersion and Service-Learning Trip Orientation and Itinerary**

Participants were required to attend two four-hour orientation sessions prior to travel. Session #1 focused on introductory activities and pragmatic tips for international travel. Faculty advisors facilitated icebreaker activities for students as a means of getting to know one another, and the Director of International Programs for the University provided a presentation on travel and behavioral and professional appearance expectations for students. A global service-learning

organization also provided information on activities the group would be involved in, what to pack, and general expectations through a pre-departure Skype meeting. The second meeting focused on the exploration of cross-cultural issues, the impact of engaging in cross-cultural service-learning, and examined individual's readiness for international travel. Faculty presented seminars on autism to prepare students to work in the special education schools, with the school counselor, and to present workshops in the host country.

During the immersion experience, the group was met by community members at the airport and transported by small bus to the host community. When the group arrived, the women of the community provided dinner in the clubhouse, and students were introduced to their host families. Students lived with host families in pairs or groups of three. Host families were responsible for meals and lodging, some transportation, and helping participants to adjust to the new environment. During the weeklong stay, students and faculty worked in the special education school performing activities requested of them by the teachers. These activities included talking with children, reading to them, observing lessons, and eating lunch with them. They also provided three workshops on autism education that included power point presentations, question and answer, and small group discussion. There was also opportunity for the participants to be immersed in the culture by visiting local and regional tourist sites and shopping.

In the evening, the group gathered at the community center for presentations on Caribbean culture, the educational system, and a culinary arts session as well as weekly meetings of the host community. At the end of the week, the group attended a Regional Cultural Pageant where pageant participants displayed talent, speaking ability, and knowledge of the local culture. The last night of the trip was reserved for a traditional send-off party with dancing and the exchange of thoughts and affection for one another as well as gifts.

## **Data Collection**

The researchers received approval to facilitate the study from the University's Institutional Review Board. Focus group methodology was purposely chosen as this study's qualitative method due to its ability to elicit "more spontaneous expressive and emotional views than in individual, often more cognitive interviews" (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 150). Given the mutuality and intimacy of the authors' and students' engagement in this service-learning opportunity, the creation of a safe space within the focus group was easily achieved. Two semi-structured focus groups, one during the trip and one post trip, were performed to collect data. The first focus group occurred in the small rural community after an educational presentation at the primary school. Approximately one and one-half hours were allotted for the researchers to complete the process. Six out of 10 questions were discussed, and all 12 students participated and provided descriptions of their lived experiences. The second focus group occurred two weeks after the trip, and 11 students participated in person and one by telephone.

Focus group questions were designed using questions that were asked of students during similar studies on service-learning and cultural immersion experiences. The focus groups typically began with questions such as "How are you?" and "Where would you like to begin?" with the faculty chaperones actively listening to connect themes across the students' experiences. The formal questions were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board for the study and included items such as: "What have you learned about the community, schools, and host family based on your current activity (ies)?" "What have you learned about yourself and cultural or worldview from these experiences?" "What have been some challenges that you have faced during the cultural immersion experience?" (see Appendix). Through this phenomenological

approach, participants were asked “think [about the cultural immersion and service-learning experience] and feel in the most direct ways” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96).

The researchers made attempts to provide opportunity for each participant to speak during the focus group. Their anonymity and confidentiality were addressed by using letters and numbers as codes for identification purposes. Likewise, all participants chose a pseudonym for their name in the study. One researcher wrote down the order of participants and recorded this information in a journal for recordkeeping. During the focus group, participant responses were recorded via a digital audio recorder for later data analysis.

The first focus group was performed during the cultural immersion trip. There were 70 verbal responses, and 12 counselors-in-training participated with two co-researchers, yielding fifteen transcribed pages of the responses. The post-trip focus group was completed three weeks after returning from the international immersion trip and included 17 transcribed pages and 11 counselors-in-training, with one counselor-in-training present by phone due to inclement weather, and two co-researchers. Each focus group was recorded. Transcriptions were completed by a professional transcriber.

An important distinction of this research study is that less formal reflexive exercises occurred daily as part of the students’ lived experiences. For example, students were encouraged to journal immediately after perceived moments of significance on the trip as a means of triangulating the data. Likewise, less formal discussions often occurred approximately every other day throughout the duration of the cultural immersion experience.

### **Researcher Positionality and Exploring Potential Biases**

The researchers involved in this study have participated in and facilitated service learning and cultural immersion trips in the past. These trips included both domestic and international

service learning, as well as cultural immersion experiences ranging from one to two-weeks of participation in host communities, schools, and universities. As such, we understand the value these opportunities offer students, including navigating the person-of-the-counselor in unfamiliar environments, connecting theory to diverse cultures, and opportunities to self-reflect on lived experiences. Recognizing our role as instruments in qualitative inquiry, we agreed to meet, discuss, and reflect on our insights throughout the study to avoid bias in the data collection, analysis, and research process. These meetings took place at various times throughout the study, including twice prior to the pre-departure workshops, every other day during the cultural immersion experience, as well as once after returning home but prior to the post-departure group meeting. Reflexivity is an important concept in qualitative inquiry. Providing space for the researchers to reflect upon their positionality, how they approached the study, and the lens through which they viewed the study, adds trustworthiness to the qualitative process (Jones et al., 2014).

### **Data Analysis**

The aim of the researcher in phenomenology is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework but remaining true to the facts, attempting to capture the complexity and ambiguity of the lived world being described. Within phenomenology, the researcher must allow the data to emerge. It is a way of transforming the data through interpretation. To instead focus on the analysis of experience, the researchers employed the use of Bracketing (Moustakas, 1994) as a means of suspending judgment about the natural world.

From the focus group conversations, initial themes were generated through Dey's (1993) concept of Relationship Discovery. According to Dey (1993), "categories [of related information] become the basis for the organization and conceptualization of the data" (p. 2). Categories organize the data in such a way that allow themes to emerge both within and across the data sets

(Shupp, 2007). Transcripts were first reviewed individually by each researcher line-by-line for salient data. Next, each researcher individually sorted the data into distinct categories. To ensure inter-rater reliability, the investigators came together and discussed their individual line-by-line coding as well as the emergent data categories. Agreements around preliminary categories and naming devices for each theme were discussed. Discrepancies with data interpretation and category generation were also discussed and, if a consensus could not be reached, an external auditor was utilized as a means of adding trustworthiness to the process. The external auditor reviewed the transcripts and data analysis and created clarity for minimal discrepancies. The auditor was not connected to the study but agreed to help with the data analysis. The auditor was asked by one of the researchers to participate in the data analysis due to a research background in qualitative research and multicultural counseling. Utilizing a process of continuous refinement (Dey, 1993) to test the saturation of the data set (Jones et al., 2014), the researchers continually reviewed the data sets that were generated from the transcripts. Through a comparison of the data sets during the refinement process, the researchers hoped to illuminate new themes from the study. Researchers discussed inconsistencies to clarify and finalize themes. Finally, the researchers agreed on themes supported by participants' quotations.

## **Results**

Results from the analysis indicated Awareness-of-Self emerged as an overarching theme of the focus group discussions. Themes within Awareness-of-Self emerged and included: personal and national privilege, cultural encapsulation, sense-of-belonging, and racism. Subthemes also emerged within those themes and included: attitudes and beliefs, cultural norms, use of time, gender roles, and community versus individualism, intra-group differences, and intra-community racism. These themes and subthemes are explained in the subsequent section.

## **Awareness-of-Self**

Awareness of self describes how participants came face-to-face with their own privilege, attitudes, beliefs, biases, intra-group differences, and thoughts concerning racism during the service learning and cultural immersion experiences. The focus groups and daily interactions were opportunities for reflecting and sharing on their experiences. A theme that was prevalent throughout focus groups was a sense of national and personal privilege as they shared experiences of service and cultural immersion.

**National and personal privilege.** Participants stated that their involvement in international service-learning and working in the schools and community allowed them to become more aware that they have privilege. The concept privilege refers to the rights, benefits, and advantages automatically received by being a member of the dominant group, regardless of intentions (Locke & Bailey, 2014; Sue & Sue, 2013). In this case, participants spoke of their socio-economic status (SES) as a privilege in the United States. They saw socio-economic status allowing them the means to have resources such as supplies, books, technology, and materials in their schools and community. During the focus groups, some participants reflected on how resources are abundant in the United States, yet people are either unaware of or indifferent to this privilege and often complain. For example, while completing service learning, participants noticed a lack of resources such as books, technology, and supplies in the host community schools. This led Participant F to state,

I was just thinking of every school in the U.S. that I've been in there have been complaints of... 'we can't work like this' and I'm looking around here [host community] where they have so little and I haven't heard anyone complain.

Similarly, Participant H indicated, "This year I heard it a lot more often the fact that they are a



third world country, and in light of that, I realized that they really don't have a lot."

### **Cultural Encapsulation**

An awareness of cultural encapsulation, thinking your culture is superior and others are inferior (Locke & Bailey, 2014; Sue & Sue, 2013) emerged as a theme in the research. This ethnocentric perspective of not understanding the culture of another and its influence on one's current worldview (Locke & Bailey, 2014; Sue & Sue, 2013) manifested in the lived experience of the counselors in training. Subthemes of encapsulation include attitudes and beliefs, cultural norms including use of time and gender roles, and community versus individualism.

**Attitudes and beliefs.** In addition to recognizing the impact of privilege on the immersion experience, participants began to recognize the attitudes and beliefs that they held about the host culture, which in some cases became challenging for them. For example, Participant F remarked,

I think the challenge for me was my preconceived notions of all the kids at the school, and I expected them to just have these horrible conditions and be down and out and crying with no air conditioning or anything. And then I got to the school and I was so surprised, and I almost cried as well. Because I was seeing a little girl and she couldn't use her hands and we were singing the ABCs and she was just like, I'm happy. I'm like, these people have so little, but they are still happy...So I just had to change my frame of thought and my attitude toward them as well...so once again, I'm realizing how appreciative they are for what they have.

These types of experiences often caused dissonance for participants between what they thought to be true compared with what they observed.

**Cultural norms.** Two concepts were noted by participants regarding cultural norms: time and gender roles. Cultural norms include the behavioral standards that a society adopts and follows when interacting with one another (Locke & Bailey, 2014; Sue & Sue, 2013). Participants found themselves comparing their views on time and gender roles and in some cases were surprised by what they observed and experienced.

**Time.** Participants commented on the frequency at which the daily schedule of activities changed or when the service-learning assignment was rearranged. In most cases, participants waned between feeling frustrated and impatient regarding the changes to feeling somewhat okay about the flexibility in time and schedules. Participant B noted,

At first, I did not understand what was going on...we had our work clothes on to go into the schools, then we were told to change to casual clothes so that we could go to the market. I like schedules...this was different...I had to adjust.

Several participants remarked how members of the host culture are far less time-conscious and more flexible than Americans and, even in some cases, began to embrace this cultural norm. For example, Participant E commented,

I think that time has been a challenge right now. Back in the States I am very anxious about getting my degree and being early [to my destinations] and I kind of freak out a little bit if the people I'm with are not on time. And it's just something that stresses me out a lot and here, it's been a little struggle but, you know the thought is that when we get to where we are supposed to be, that's when we get there [and that seems to be the norm].

**Gender roles.** Comments regarding male and female roles were another theme that surfaced during the analysis. Participants noted a certain status prescribed to the males in the community compared to that of the females. The men in the community were described as

leaders. The same held true for the male participants of our group. For example, the two male participants, one African-American and the other Jamaican-American, were referred to as King or Prince throughout the community experience. These titles were distinctions of status in the host culture and embraced by the male participants.

Comments during the focus groups centered on the comparison of the gender roles of women in the United States compared to the roles observed by women in the host community. According to our participants, most of the host families in the community are led by women who perform more traditional roles such as doing household chores, taking care of children, and working outside the home. In comparison, the female participants in our group described their roles and that of other women in the United States as having more opportunities and not being tied to what they considered traditional roles. For example, Participant I summed it up by saying, “I can attend graduate school, work outside the home, and my partner shares in the childcare and homemaking responsibilities.” Other participants expressed that women of the host community were not described as leaders. They were particularly confused because the host country has a female prime minister; however, this did not seem to change or influence how women were portrayed in the home and community. Participant I stated,

There is a difference in the roles that men and women take in the community... women doing work, preparing meals, and taking care of the home and us...I think it's just that they don't have the feminist movement here per se.... although they do have a female prime minister...

**Community versus individualism.** The theme Community versus Individualism was noted by participants throughout their interactions with host families, attendance at community meetings, and involvement in service-learning in the schools. According to our participants,

“community” was described as the support, reliance, and help that they saw community members give to each other throughout the immersion experience. Participant C voiced the collective reflection of the group:

I’m reminded that community is community...there is a certain interdependence within the community...community over individualism...I think that an individualistic mindset is something that I think is very common in our culture and that is something that we’ve grown up to think, that we’ve brought here and that’s something that’s very different than what has been displayed to us.

The interdependence within the community was also emphasized by participants as they noted sharing that took place with food supplies, school resources, and money to help neighboring countries. Again, participants became aware of the difference between collaboration over interdependence within a community. According to Participant F,

[Community members] do more with less and are very appreciative of what they have. What struck me is that they were raising money for another island nation even though they don’t have much they still want to help another country...

Lastly, some of the participants became aware that their attitude about having a job and earning money for that job was also tied to their concept of autonomy and individualism. They observed work and pay more closely tied to interdependence and support which challenged their perspectives of work and pay. For example, Participant G noted,

I am surprised that they do all this work and don’t get paid [money] for it but they do things for the community leader. So that is a shock to me because...I imagine that they could be doing something like a job...but I’m putting my own expectations on them.

## **Sense of Belonging**

Another theme that emerged included a sense of belonging by participants. Participants became aware of their internal experiences around belonging or fitting in with others. Discussion of the sense of belonging fell along racial lines and was directly linked to either feeling included or excluded in the community. Although all participants reported feeling connected to host families, a distinction in the data indicated that African American female students felt “at home for the first time” and felt that they could embrace their Blackness. For example, Participant L, a Black female, reported, “It’s easy for me to be myself here since the people here are Black, I look like them, I don’t stand out. At school, I stand out because I usually am the only Black person in the community.” Participant F informed,

In America you know Black people are taught to not like what they look like. This is the first time where I’m not worried about ‘Oh my skin is too dark’ or ‘Oh what do I look like?’ or worried about my shade [skin-tone]. I can just love what I look like.

**Racism.** The topic of race was brought up during the focus groups as participants shared about their experiences of being Black or White in a predominantly black community. Results are presented under two categories: intragroup differences and intra-community racism.

***Intragroup differences.*** For the White participants, the international cultural immersion service-learning trip provided an opportunity for them to experience difference based upon race. This created self-awareness and empathy. Participant E recounted the experience of being set apart by skin color in a large public group that had never occurred for her before.

I had a huge racial experience at the cultural pageant because that was the first time we were the only White people [at the event]. I never had that before, and I sat there and thought, ‘This is what it feels like to look different from everybody.’

While Participant E grappled with responding to the experience of feeling different, Participant H, a White female, struggled with feelings of envy due to the attention Black participants received in the host community, yet important media figures were White or lighter skinned. This created confusion and then awareness with regards to how racism is demonstrated. Participant H stated,

I really appreciated the racial diversity in this [focus] group, and I noticed that the host guides would interact with some [Black participants] differently, and I noticed myself being jealous at times, but then I would be watching the news and there was this White woman reporting the news with her Caribbean accent. And I was, like, something's wrong here. So wherever you go, there's definitely racial stigmas.

Participant H realized that racism can be experienced by looking or feeling different and by being aware of the sociopolitical significance when a White person has power and privilege in a country that is predominately Black (Robinson, 2005). Participant D described an experience of feeling like an outsider and the difficulty and confusion of not understanding the patois spoken at the cultural pageant as well.

The [Caribbean-American participant] was translating patois at the pageant and I was thinking about students that are English Language Learners. I thought that [this] is what it must feel like to them and [to] not know what they are saying and [that] no one looks like you.

Lastly, Participant C testified to a profound experience of recognizing the possible costs and consequences of being White during a home visit with the school counselor:

I think for me the racial piece became very clear when the four of us went on the home visit with the school counselor... Wanting to work abroad, it was the first time I realized

that maybe I shouldn't work abroad. When the school counselor said hang back [because] it is very possible that these parents have not seen a White person before and they are going to be scared of you and I was going to say, 'I'm nice, come on,' but I understand it's the first time that's ever happened to me, and I was thinking what it would look like at the host community school and I would not be effective, and that was hard for me to swallow...so even though I've lived abroad before, I never noticed how White I am.

**Intra-community racism.** The participants made comments about what they considered to be racism within the community. Their comments focused on what they saw on television, billboards, and heard during community meetings. In most cases they were confused that in a predominately Black community, racism seemed to exist regarding skin tone and physical features of community members. It was noted that the news reporters on television, posters throughout the school and community, and resources such as dolls in the schools were White or light skinned Black. Participant H recalled how racism within the community transpired at an early age:

There was a little girl that asked me if my skin was White from bleach. It was my initial thought that she was trying to be funny but then I thought about it. I thought that it was hard for me to think that people would dislike the color of their skin so much that they would apply bleach to themselves.

Participants noted how racism permeates the community. Participant B reflected on a comment that was made by the community leader during a meeting. Quoting the leader, Participant B said, "If you are White you are right, if you're Brown, stick around, if you are Black stay back." The leader of the community spoke about how racism in the host country inhibits opportunities for economic well-being of the schools, children, and community needs in general.

According to the community leader, a common belief throughout the host country is that skin color has both historical and political ties to subjugation for a society of Black people that struggle for their freedom and economic independence as a culture. A Black female, Participant L, said, “that’s what it is like at home [United States].”

### **Discussion**

This study extends the counselor education literature indicating that service-learning and cultural immersion experiences are opportunities for counselors-in-training to apply theoretical concepts of MSJCC to real-world scenarios (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Bleicher & Correia, 2011; Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Burnett, et al., 2004; Consoli, et al., 2006; Hutchinson, 2011; Krentzman & Townsend, 2008; Middleton et al., 2011; Platt, 2012; Taggart & Crisp, 2011). The literature is rich with program-specific examples of successful service- and cross-cultural learning experiences. Researchers in this study sought to investigate the lived experience of counselors-in-training using qualitative research methods. The analysis of focus group interactions was the method used to process the lived experience. Participants indicated that the focus groups provided a safe space where they could exchange ideas, experiences, and perspectives of the lived experience. Data from these conversations suggested that participants became aware of their attitudes and beliefs around self and others from a multicultural perspective including privilege, cultural encapsulation, sense of belonging, and racism. Variables influencing participants’ conversations regarding immersion experiences were the racial and gender differences of group members. The following section provides a discussion of the lived experiences.

### **Lived Experiences**

Participants became aware of their cultural norms and the impact of these norms on



their immersion experience. Literature indicates that self-awareness and sensitivity to one's own cultural upbringing can support the development of culturally skilled counselors as well as an awareness of how that cultural background has influenced attitudes, values, and beliefs (Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, & Parham, 2008). Living with host families, providing service in the schools and community, and the exchange within focus groups enhanced participants' awareness of their personal and national privilege, norms regarding time, sense of belonging, and questions that arose about racism. According to Sue and Sue (2013), worldviews determine how people perceive their relationships to the world (nature, institutions, other people, etc.). In addition, worldviews are highly correlated with a person's cultural upbringing and life experiences. Recognizing one's own privilege is crucial in expanding one's worldview and multicultural counseling competency (Arredondo et al., 1996).

Throughout this study participants gained an awareness of a culture that seemed better in some ways when it came to such norms as time, interdependence, sharing of resources, and collaboration, while challenging in other ways, when it came to understanding differences in gender roles and intra community racism. One cultural norm, time, which initially was a challenge for participants, soon became an opportunity for participants to become more flexible in their own concept of time. As noted in the results, through living within the community, participants gained a deeper understanding and awareness of norms regarding time and perhaps the significance that the culture places on relaxation, decreased stress, and flexibility around time constraints.

Many questions regarding gender that arose during the focus groups, provided opportunities for further discussion on cultural competency. For example, the world view of female participants on feminism as they know it in the United States (women as leader,

independent and working in nontraditional roles), remained challenged. The female participants thought that having a female Prime Minister meant that feminism would be apparent and valued in the host community. Perceptions of the female participants were that the host community women should have a more elevated status according to what they were used to seeing in the United States.

The literature indicates that cultural competence includes recognizing discomfort with differences in race, ethnicity, and culture as well as awareness of the social impact of imposing one's own cultural values as better than when immersed in another culture (Arredondo et al, 1996; Locke & Bailey, 2004; Sue & Sue, 2013). Discussion about race, ethnicity, and culture were noted in participants' awareness of "fitting in" or sense-of-belonging with the community and with each other.

Participants of the study felt welcomed by host families. However, during the focus group discussions, it was apparent that White participants became aware of their privilege and cultural encapsulation as it pertains to being part of the dominant racial group in the United States. In some cases, this challenged White participants' sense-of-belonging, i.e., White participants being the only White people at the cultural pageant and needing our Caribbean-American participant to interpret the language. On the other hand, during the focus groups, Black participants were able to express how this was the first time that they felt a sense of belonging (feeling at home) because the majority of people in the immersion community were Black.

The lived experience of vulnerability and coping with the discomfort of cultural barriers outside of students' normal lives increased awareness of attitudes and beliefs which deepened access to emotions (Arredondo et al., 1996; Burnett et al, 2004; Comstock et al., 2008) which in turn strengthened connections to self and others. Additionally, self-awareness allows counselors-

in-training to gain understanding of their status and power and to relate with empathy more fully to others and their future clients (Sue & Sue, 2013).

The diversity of the group provided data on intra-group reflections on race and gender. Data from the intra-group discussions indicate how cultural immersion experiences provide opportunities for counselors-in-training to develop awareness about the way visually different racial characteristics, including skin color, profoundly influence one's experiences and worldview. African American participants recognized that they had a qualitatively different lived experience on this trip. They became more aware of the cultural biases they live with day in and out and how it has affected their sense of self and their feelings about their appearance. Awareness of one's own culture and either its privilege or marginalization is essential to understanding the self (Ratts et al., 2016). Through this lived experience, these counselors-in-training became open and vulnerable to their own cultural identity and an opportunity to explore themselves more fully. These experiences enhanced a self-awareness and a foundation for creating multicultural counseling competency (Arredondo et al, 1996; Ratts et al., 2016).

The topic of color (racial) differences within the community including "skin bleaching," light-skinned people shown in media, and differences in opportunities based on skin-tone expressed by the host community leader, created a disequilibrium amongst the group. Participants appeared confused about how skin tone could be an issue in a country that is predominantly Black. The concept "colorism," the privileging of light skin tone over dark skin tone, has historically been a factor in the racialized social processes and experiences of African Americans in the United States (Keith, 2009). Colorism is further described as status based on privileging directed at African Americans' complexion, along with Eurocentric physical features- blue, gray, or green eyes, straight hair texture, thin lips, and a narrow nose. Participants'

reactions substantiated the host community leader's statement about skin tone and status in the host country.

Recognizing the social impact that racial and cultural aspects may have on others is crucial knowledge for counseling students in understanding themselves and their influence on others in relationship (Ratts et al., 2016). These aspects of self may not have come to light without these unique experiences of cultural immersion. The intensity of the lived experience deeply impacted and truly heightened awareness-of-self and created opportunities for exploring attitudes and beliefs, which helped students develop self-knowledge.

### **Implications for Counselors and Counselor Education**

The call to address MSJCC competencies is grounded in the counselor education literature indicating the need to educate mental health, school, and student affairs professionals to be effective practitioners in the field (Ratts et al., 2016). As the population becomes more diverse, continued attention needs to be placed on developing effective counselor client relationships that influence client participation and retention in the counseling process. To become effective practitioners means to examine attitudes and biases that can interfere with the client-counselor relationship.

Through service learning and cultural immersion, graduate students can experience environments and cultures that are different from their own and can create an awareness-of-self including concepts of privilege, cultural encapsulation, sense of belonging, and racial attitudes and/or beliefs that could impact counseling relationships. Learning opportunities can be challenging but can also lead to growth opportunities towards MSJCC. Multicultural competency growth depends on the identity and experience of the participants, particularly when interacting with others (Locke & Bailey, 2014; Ratts et al., 2016; Sue & Sue, 2013). The service-learning

experience aided counseling graduate students' growth in their understanding of racism and gender differences, helping to develop their competencies as counselors. The service-learning trip to the host nation provided opportunities for participants to assess cultural competencies that guide interpersonal counseling interactions, counselor awareness of cultural values and biases through educational and cultural discussions, and counselor awareness of client's worldview via direct immersion into a new culture.

### **Best Practices**

Goals of the research were to allow students to explore their cultural competency as a lived experience and to extend education beyond the classroom. Consoli et al. (2006) suggested the examination of the cultural self and the exploration of individual motivations for participating in the cultural immersion trip to better prepare counselors-in-training for the experience. Adequate time and strategies must be dedicated to the organization of service-learning and cultural immersion opportunities before, during, and after travel experiences to enhance cultural learning.

Currently, the cultural immersion and service-learning opportunities in this department are voluntary and not attached to a credit-bearing course. Therefore, the researchers designed and implemented compulsory pre-trip information sessions about the immersion culture. Resources to design these sessions came from meetings with members of the host community, representatives from the service learning and cultural immersion agency, and the University international travel director. The researchers also planned educational activities with the participants on cultural competency. Time spent during these sessions provided opportunities for participants to ask questions, interact and get to know each other prior to departing to the host community. Following the immersion experience, the researchers designed and implemented

post-trip sessions to allow opportunities for debriefing about the experience and sharing further thoughts about the lived experience. As counselor educators in the field, we think that these sessions are best practices to follow to support immersion and service-learning goals.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Considerations for future research were presented during an analysis of focus group conversations. Topics warranting further investigation include cultural norms surrounding differences in gender roles of immersion communities along with what these differences look like when working with diverse clients. Another area of research that surfaced during the analysis was the topic of intra-group racism. Further, investigation could address how colorism impacts diverse populations as they enter counseling. Awareness and knowledge of these topics could extend conversations that relate to race and culture in society and knowledge to enhance the therapeutic relationship.

Implications for future research also include directing attention to the methodology and varying the means upon which participants record their lived experiences. Burnett et al. (2004) suggested the promotion of risk-taking, intergroup dialogue, and emotional openness to enhance self-reflection and self-awareness. A safe place to start may be in structured, prompted journal writing and progressing to more open and candid peer-to-peer processing. The researchers also suggest additional focus groups before, after, and particularly during the service and immersion experience. More process groups during the immersion will allow participants to express the immediacy of the lived experience and connect with each other around feelings and insights. Allowing for structured prompts to intentionally incite deeper self-reflection could also form a foundation for an academic course, Service-Learning and Cultural Immersion for Counselor Education, which can complement the travel experience. International service-learning in counselor education is in its infancy, and it may be useful for

counselor educators to be more collaborative to streamline research to find best practices.

### **Limitations**

Participants in this study included students enrolled in a graduate counselor preparation program and one social work graduate student at the University. While the results of this qualitative study provide useful data for counseling training programs, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings from this institution-specific study to a larger population. The program was voluntary and funded solely by the participants within the department. To encourage a diverse group of participants, the researchers wrote a grant offered from the University. While the researchers were awarded the grant, it failed to provide enough funds to make the trip affordable for all who wished to go. The increasing cost associated with future trips does not ensure that all counselor trainees are provided equal access of attendance due to their socioeconomic circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

The increased focus on the internationalization of higher education and the diversification of our student body requires a new skill set not readily acquired within the confines of a traditional classroom. For this reason, counselor education programs can be enhanced by offering opportunities for service-learning and cross-cultural experiences. These experiences can range from voluntary travel to credit-bearing courses as part of the curriculum. This expanded model of learning for counselors-in-training enhances the exploration of their inner worldview and deepens their counseling practice from a multicultural counseling competency perspective. Service-learning and cultural immersion programs not only supplement in-class learning but provide an invaluable learning opportunity. In our increasingly complex and diverse world, these skills will not only be necessary, but this learning experience could prove invaluable to the future counseling practitioners and their clients.

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## Appendix

### Focus Group Questions

- What have you learned about the community, schools, and host family based on your current activity(ies)?
- Discuss differences that you experience in relation to your cultural and ethnic identity and the community, schools, and host family of Petersfield, Jamaica
- What have been some challenges that you have faced during the cultural immersion experience?
- What have you learned about yourself and cultural or worldview from these experiences?
- Describe your understanding of some of the social issues that you have encountered from your experience.
- Describe your understanding of some of the political issues, if any, that you have encountered from your experience.
- How have you addressed differences in your perspective of the Jamaican culture and that of the United States?
- Describe your comfort level in living with a host family of a different ethnic group.
- How have your thoughts about the Jamaican community changed or remained the same following your cultural immersion?