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# Multicultural Counselor Training: Assessment of Single-Course Objectives and Pedagogical Strategies

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which multicultural counseling courses throughout the United States include course objectives and pedagogical strategies recommended in the literature (Arredondo et al., 1996) and in professional counseling standards and guidelines. Findings from 277 participants indicate that most, not all, courses include the recommended objectives and strategies. The most common (85.9%) objective was self-awareness of own values and biases, whereas only approximately 50 percent included an objective related to critiquing counseling theories. The most common pedagogical strategies were classroom discussions/debates (95.3%), whereas fewer than half integrated cross-discipline readings and student research. The authors suggest dialogue and empirical investigations necessary to further the practice of multicultural counselor training.

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Krista M. Malott, Tina R. Paone, Cleborne Maddux and Terri Rothman

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The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which multicultural counseling courses throughout the United States include course objectives and pedagogical strategies recommended in the literature (Arredondo et al., 1996) and in professional counseling standards and guidelines. Findings from 277 participants indicate that most, not all, courses include the recommended objectives and strategies. The most common (85.9%) objective was self-awareness of own values and biases, whereas only approximately 50 percent included an objective related to critiquing counseling theories. The most common pedagogical strategies were classroom discussions/debates (95.3%), whereas fewer than half integrated cross-discipline readings and student research. The authors suggest dialogue and empirical investigations necessary to further the practice of multicultural counselor training.

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In an effort to provide effective mental health services for a rapidly diversifying client population, counselor educators have come to recognize the need for multiculturally competent counseling professionals (Pope-Davis, Coleman, Liu, & Toporek, 2003; Sue & Sue, 2008). Multicultural counseling competency has been broadly defined as counselor awareness of personal culture and biases, awareness and knowledge of clients' unique traits and world views, and skills or strategies in working with diverse clientele (Arredondo et al., 1996). Over time, those

directives have informed standards for effective multicultural counselor training (MCT), including the decision to require a multicultural course across counselor training programs (Alvarez & Miville, 2003; Reynolds, 1995; Ridley, Espelage, & Rubenstein, 1997).

Authors have provided varied and expansive suggestions for the design and implementation of a multicultural counseling course. Those suggestions have evolved over time as the definition of multicultural competence has evolved. For instance, core objectives of increasing student knowledge, awareness and skills have expanded

(Fuentes, Bartolomeo, & Nicols, 2001) to include recognition of the need to increase student empathy, cultural responsiveness, and ethical behaviors with diverse clientele (Ridley, Mendoza, & Kanitz, 1994).

In response to contemporary issues, authors have posited a need to increase counselor knowledge of various religions (Yarhouse & Fisher, 2002) and of the counselor's role globally (Chung, 2005; Leong & Ponterotto, 2003). In addition, a recent study in the literature identified social justice as a growing emphasis in multicultural counseling courses (Pieterse, Evans, Risner-Butner, Collins, & Mason, 2009), although skill-based instruction according to social justice initiatives appeared deficient in the 54 course syllabi assessed by the authors.

Hence, multiple learning objectives could be addressed in a multicultural course. However, it is uncertain whether instructor practices reflect recommendations found in the literature. Time constraints or limited knowledge regarding certain objectives may limit what instructors are able to address (Hayes, Dean, & Chang, 2007; Ridley et al., 1997). In turn, instructors may be forced to omit multiple learning objectives that are considered essential for MCT. Conversely, counselor educators who address all suggested learning objectives within a course risk presenting the material in a superficial or stereotypical manner (Reynolds, 1995).

A similar dilemma exists in regards to pedagogical strategies for a multicultural counselor course. Authors assert the importance of using a mixture of strategies in an effort to respond to a variety of student learning styles (Alvarez & Miville, 2003). For instance, experiential activities could be combined with didactic activities, such as lecture and readings that include cross-disciplinary readings in history, political science, ethnic studies and so forth (Alvarez & Miville, 2003; Kim & Lyons, 2003; Tromski & Dotson, 2003). Counselor self-awareness could be facilitated through use of introspection, in conjunction with writing and reading assignments. Actual counseling

skills could be observed and practiced through participatory learning (e.g., role playing, simulated counseling experiences), technology-assisted training, and modeling/observational learning (Ridley et al., 1994). Modeling and observational learning have particularly been encouraged for use as a precursor to the practicing of skills (McRae & Johnson, 1991).

Hence, multiple suggestions from the literature lend direction in the design and implementation of a multicultural counseling course. However, such a wide variety of options could also make the process of course design and implementation overwhelming. It could ultimately result in wide differences in educational practices across counseling programs, despite calls for standardized MCT across counselor training programs (McCarthy & Santus, 2003).

In an attempt to gather insight into current MCT in a course format, this study assessed instructor practices in a single multicultural counseling course in order to increase understanding of instructional practices and provide a platform from which additional, related studies of MCT practices may be launched. Specifically, this study examined learning objectives and pedagogical strategies applied in a multicultural counseling course. This study was designed to address the following research questions:

1. What percentage of instructors report including each of 15 commonly recommended objectives (Arredondo et al., 1996; Kiselica, 2004; Reynolds, 1995; Ridley et al., 1997; Ridley et al., 1994) in their required multicultural counseling course?
2. Which of the objectives are most commonly addressed?
3. What percentage of instructors report using each of 14 commonly recommended pedagogical strategies (Alvarez & Miville, 2003; Arredondo et al., 1996; Kim & Lyons,

- 2003; Ridley et al., 1997; Ridley et al., 1994; Tromski & Dotson, 2003)?
4. Which of the recommended pedagogical strategies are most commonly integrated?

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were identified through a membership list of two branches of the American Counseling Association (ACA), Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) and Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ). We believed that targeting those two associations would allow access to as many instructors of multicultural counseling courses as possible. Members of ACES teach various courses at the college/university level and therefore part of this membership would likely be teaching a multicultural counseling course. Members of CSJ are often self recognized instructors of multicultural counseling courses, so inviting this group to participate would also likely reach a large number of multicultural counseling instructors.

Of the 1675 ACES and CSJ members, 277 participants (38.4% male, 61.6% female) responded to an author-designed survey instrument (response rate = 16.5%). Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 73 years, with a mean age of 45.5 (SD = 10.77) and a median age of 46 years. Participants predominantly identified themselves as Euro-American (63.2 %), with others reporting as African American (14.9%), Latino/Hispanic (9.2%), Asian (5.4%), Native American (4.6%), and multiethnic (10%). Of those professionals, 57% held a doctorate degree in counselor education; 10% held a doctorate in Counseling Psychology; while 33% held master's degrees or were finishing their doctorate degrees in a counseling field. All participants were instructors of multicultural counseling courses.

Participants represented 49 out of 50 States in the U.S. (with the exception of Hawaii). They reported having the following programs at their institutions: doctoral level counselor education programs (37.6%); doctoral level counseling psychology programs (11.7%); school emphasis (77.4%); community counseling (71.1%); college/university counseling (22.9%); and marriage and family counseling (21.8%). The majority of participants (63.3%) were from CACREP accredited programs.

### *Instrumentation*

This study was conducted in accordance with the procedures approved by Institutional Review Boards from both institutions involved. For this study, respondents were asked to respond to two web-based survey items administered through survey monkey ([http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=t9KkJofYfKmp4hKF05u1dQ\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=t9KkJofYfKmp4hKF05u1dQ_3d_3d)). These two items addressed course objectives and pedagogical strategies in multicultural courses taught by respondents. For the first item, they were asked to identify, through a checklist, which of 14 pedagogical strategies they utilized in their MCT course. The second item asked MCT instructors to identify their MCT objectives from a checklist of 15 objectives. Respondents were asked to check all items that applied to their course.

The scale was developed after an extensive examination of the literature, with a review of 148 written artifacts that included articles or book chapters which were empirical and nonempirical in nature. We reviewed articles that addressed multicultural competencies or education, and articles that provided guidelines for multicultural counseling instruction were particularly useful for survey design (e.g., Kim & Lyons, 2003; Reynolds, 1995; Ponterotto, 1997; Ridley et al., 1994, 1997; Roysircar, Gard, Hubbell, & Ortega, 2005; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992).

Approximately 10 articles that addressed multicultural education in the related field of teacher education were also selected due to their status as either seminal literature or status as a major theorist or researcher in that field (e.g., Banks et al., 2005; Sleeter & Grant, 1987; Tatum, 1992).

In addition, standards from the major professional counseling and counseling psychology organizations were used in survey development, including the guidelines set by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) and the American Psychological Association's guidelines for multicultural education (APA; 2002). Finally, newer directives for multicultural competencies, as addressed in the literature, were included. Those included social justice issues (Kiselica, 2004), religion (Yarhouse & Fisher, 2002) and global awareness (Chung, 2005; Leong & Ponterotto, 2003).

To further address the content validity of the survey, five counselor educators, with specific training and expertise in multicultural counselor training, reviewed the survey language and content of the survey items for both accuracy and comprehensiveness. For reliability purposes, through the cross-tab function, the researchers calculated the frequencies for several sub-samples within the data and found comparable item percentages across various iterations, thus suggesting high reliability.

#### *Procedure and Analysis*

Participants were contacted via email with a request to participate in the study. They were provided a link to a web

site that gave a description of the research and an online version of the survey. Two weeks later, a follow-up email was sent to those who had yet to complete the survey.

Of the 1675 persons contacted, a total of 309 participants responded to the survey. However, 32 surveys were incomplete, yielding a usable sample of 277 (response rate = 16.5%).

Participants were instructed of their rights through informed consent, and all survey responses were completed electronically through survey monkey. Once the deadline for participation ended, responses were downloaded to Excel and uploaded to SPSS for further analysis.

## **Results**

To determine the percentage of instructors who addressed each of the identified MCT objectives in their courses, we provided a list of the 15 MCT objectives and asked participants to identify any and all objectives addressed in their MCT courses. Frequencies and percentages of respondents who covered each of the 15 MCT objectives were calculated, and each objective appeared to be covered by the majority of MCT course instructors (See Table 1).

The most frequently selected objective (85.9%;  $n = 262$ ) was, "Increase student awareness of their own assumptions, values and biases regarding others," and the least often mentioned objective was, "Critiquing counseling theories for cultural relevance," identified by ( $n = 140$ ) 50.5 percent of respondents.

**Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages of Respondents Who Reported that Syllabi Included Specified Course Objectives (N = 277)**

Objective	f	%	Rank
Increase students' awareness of their own assumptions, values and biases regarding others	262	94.6	1
Develop cultural empathy	244	88.1	2
Increase knowledge about characteristics of different groups	238	85.9	3
Improve Increase awareness of systemic inequalities	237	85.6	4
Increase ethical knowledge and practice	231	83.4	5
Improve multicultural skills (strategies, etc. )	230	83.0	6
Increase student ethnic/racial identity development	229	82.7	7
Increase student perception of future roles as advocates for diverse client populations	228	82.3	8
Increase student perception of future role as advocates for community/societal change	211	76.2	9
Increase knowledge of within-group differences	203	73.3	10
Increase student global perspective	181	65.3	11
Increase student awareness/understanding of diverse religions	171	61.7	12
Increase student understanding about diagnosis and misdiagnosis of diverse populations	165	59.6	13
Increase knowledge of appropriate assessment practices with diverse populations	154	55.6	14
Critiquing counseling theories for cultural relevance	140	50.5	15

We also calculated frequencies and percentages of instructors who addressed each of 14 commonly recommended MCT pedagogical strategies (See Table 2). The three most frequently applied strategies, in order of frequency, were: (a) classroom discussions/debates (n = 264; 95.3%); (b) textbook reading, counseling related (n =

252; 91.0%); and (c) self-reflective assignments (n = 249; 89.8%). The three least frequently identified strategies were: (a) modeling/observational learning (n = 144; 52.0%); (b) cross-discipline reading (history, politics, literature, etc.) (n = 116; 41.9%); and (c) student research (n = 114; 41.2%).

**Table 2: Frequencies and Percentages of Respondents Who Reported Using Selected Pedagogical Strategies (N = 277)**

Strategies	f	%	Rank
Classroom Discussions/Debates	264	95.3	1
Textbook Reading, Counseling Related	252	91.0	2
Self-Reflective Assignments (Journaling, Reaction Papers)	249	89.9	3
Exploration of Students' Culture or Immigrant History	246	88.8	4
Didactic Lectures	243	87.7	5
Experiential Classroom Activity	234	84.5	6
Technology Assisted Training (videos, etc.)	216	78.0	7

External Experiential Requirements (exposure/immersion)	202	72.9	8*
Multicultural Case Conceptualizations	202	72.9	8*
Exams and/or Quizzes	165	59.6	10
Required External Events Related to Diversity Issues	149	53.8	11
Modeling/Observational Learning	144	52.0	12
Cross-Discipline Reading (history, politics, literature, etc.)	116	41.9	13
Student Research	114	41.2	14

\* Denotes tie in rank

## Discussion

### *Objectives*

Findings in this study revealed that the majority of MCT instructors attempted to address each of the 15 core objectives derived from the literature and professional standards and guidelines, indicating that the majority of educators in this study had designed their courses according to professional directives. For instance, the majority of instructors cited addressing multicultural counseling competencies that meet CACREP Standard 2, Social and Cultural Diversity (CACREP, 2009). This corroborates findings from a recent national study of counselor education and counseling psychology programs, indicating comprehensive coverage of material within multicultural courses (Pieterse, et al., 2009). These studies raise the question of whether instructors are sacrificing depth for breadth and, in the process, covering material in a superficial or ineffective manner, a phenomenon suggested by researchers (Hays et al., 2007; Reynolds, 1995; Ridley et al., 1994).

*Most and least selected objectives.* As indicated in Table 1, over 85 percent of the participants stated that they included objectives in their course syllabi that addressed counselor traits. The most frequently selected were objectives that focused on increasing students' awareness of personal biases (94.6%), student cultural empathy (88.1%), knowledge about characteristics of different groups (85.9%), and student awareness of systemic inequalities (85.5%). Addressing student

traits to promote individual change has been cited as a key goal for increasing multicultural counselor competence (Arredondo et al., 1996; Hays et al., 2007; Tomlinson-Clarke, 2000) and is fairly consistent with Pieterse et al.'s (2009) research that examined multicultural counseling syllabi. Pieterse et al found that MCT instruction placed more emphasis on the promotion of awareness than skills. Moreover, increasing student awareness of systemic inequalities could be identified as a social justice component (Love, 2000), consistent with prior directives (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007; Kiselica, 2004) asserting the importance of social justice training in counselor training.

Instructors in the current study were least likely to include assessment and diagnosis objectives in their courses. Authors have asserted the importance of addressing those topics in training (Harper & McFadden, 2003; Hays, 2008; Ridley et al., 1994; Roysircar), as counselors risk overestimating the degree of client pathology when applying theoretical assumptions, assessment, and diagnosis practices with a Western or European frame of reference (Roysircar, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2008). Potentially, in some training programs, such objectives were met in a separate assessment/diagnosis or theories course. However, such practice should be verified by multicultural counseling instructors who chose not to address those topics in their own course.



### *Pedagogical Strategies*

Over half of the participants reported applying 12 of the 14 strategies listed, indicating a broad range of teaching strategies in multicultural courses. Use of mixed strategies has been promoted in the literature as an effective means for teaching students with diverse learning styles (Alvarez & Miville, 2003). The most commonly selected pedagogical strategies appeared to be those that promoted student self-exploration (discussions and self-reflective assignments) or were didactic in nature (lecture and textbook reading). The popularity of those forms of instruction was consistent with recommendations in the literature (Alvarez & Miville, 2003). Additionally, some research supports the efficacy of self-reflective assignments in multicultural training (Murphy, Park & Lonsdale, 2006; Roysircar et al., 2005).

Diverging from recommendations in the literature, instructors in this study reported using experiential activities less frequently than other teaching techniques. External activities provide exposure to a diverse population outside of the classroom setting, and research shows that exposure to different populations promotes student multicultural competencies (Dickson & Jepsen, 2007; Manese, Wu, & Nepomuceno, 2001; Roysircar et al., 2005). Hence, we recommend that counselor educators increase the use of such assignments within a multicultural course.

Implementing research within the class was least frequently applied as a pedagogical strategy (mentioned by 41.2%). We recognize the limited time available for such practice. However, we also believe research can be used as a powerful teaching tool, as instructors can help students recognize abusive or culturally-biased research practices with oppressed groups. For instance, instructors can identify the potential harm of a study focused upon „the negative outcomes of African-American single-parent families“ (e.g., a negative or pathological focus) while requiring students to redesign a strengths-based, less biased,

study, such as identification of the strengths of single-parent African American families.

Student-led multicultural research could also be applied to shift focus from those oppressed to those who have perpetuated oppression, such as looking at White racial identity development or aspects of oppression or racism related to Whiteness or White individuals (Sue & Sue, 2008). Given that classroom research may require more time than instructors have available within one course, students could instead design and create hypothetical studies not fully implemented. Such a project provides an opportune venue for educating students of past abusive research practices, while encouraging them to critically assess for any biased assumptions that may have informed their own study designs.

Survey findings showed that instructors were also less likely to utilize cross-discipline reading (41.9%) and modeling/observational learning (52.0%) as instructional strategies, both activities promoted in the literature (Alvarez & Miville, 2003; LaFromboise & Foster 1992). We posit that literature from professionals in sociology, teacher education, psychology, political science, and the health sciences (e.g., medical fields, including nursing) can provide a more sophisticated, if not systemic, understanding of the complex environmental factors leading to social injustices faced by clientele. For example, *Scientific American* recently published an article summarizing studies from various fields, describing the influence of poverty upon health and the root of poor health for the impoverished (Sapolsky, 2005). Another resource is the book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Fadiman, 1997), which presents a powerful description of the clash of two cultures, as a Hmong family is forced to receive Western health care services that dramatically differ from their own beliefs regarding illness, helping, and healing. Counseling students could address the implications of those readings on their future work with certain populations. In addition, such readings present a forum to

discuss the benefits of cross-discipline collaboration.

### *Implications and Suggestions for Future Research*

This study delineated current training practices, through an investigation of course objectives and pedagogical strategies, addressed within a single multicultural course at colleges and universities across the United States. We suggest that multicultural counselor educators critically examine their current training practices and the underlying beliefs that inform them. There is no consensus on the definition of multicultural competency and MCT objectives. Hence, there is a need to create a more universal understanding of the characteristics, dimensions, and features of multicultural counselor competence before practitioners can address multicultural training in a more consistent manner (Ridley & Kleiner, 2003).

We believe that a certain level of standardization of course content and pedagogical strategies may be beneficial. However, recommendations should be made according to empirically-supported practices, which are currently limited in number. In addition, some research suggests a need to adjust the delivery of MCT to the individual needs of the student group. For instance, research has shown that students of color respond differently from White students to MCT. Whites' responses to MCT are also uniquely influenced by their racial identity development statuses (Smith, Constantine, Dunn, Dinehart, & Montoya, 2006).

Consequently, educators in the fields of counseling and counseling psychology should carefully review and consider the empirical literature before proposing standardization of course content. Before a decision can be made, a first step is to determine, empirically, which current MCT topics and pedagogical strategies produce the most multiculturally competent counselors. Secondly, counselor educators must also extend empirical

studies to fully understand the types of MCT strategies that benefit specific groups of students. Recommendations for implementation of empirical studies are as follows:

1. Additional studies must determine the efficacy of current practices. There is a need to examine outcomes based on actual student-counselor success with clientele following MCT, as opposed to using traditional self-report measures, which may be more susceptible to response bias (Smith et al., 2006). Studies should be implemented to determine if a best course format exists. Do students gain different levels of multicultural counselor competencies based on these current, differing courses? Future studies should apply experimental research designs to minimize threats to the internal validity of the results. In addition, studies should specifically delineate course content, with comparisons of different courses to determine the most effective course format.
2. Are courses that address fewer objectives, but with more depth, more effective in producing multiculturally competent counselors than those that address more objectives with less depth? Studies should determine if one practice is superior to the other, again, with application of experimental designs and full description of course formats.
3. Which combination of objectives provides the most effective course format? Assessment of students' multicultural competency levels based on actual counseling outcomes, in lieu of self-reported studies, would ideally be applied (Smith et al., 2006).

4. Similarly, which pedagogical strategies are best applied and in which order? Should standardization exist? For example, Tomlinson-Clarke and Wangs (1999) suggest use of a mixture of pedagogical strategies in a specific order, beginning with didactic and shifting to experiential. Others have suggested different formats. For instance, Ridley et al. (1994) provided a grid of 10 strategies and 10 learning objectives, with directives to mix and match those creatively and expansively.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is reliance on self-reported information. It is possible that participants may have tailored their responses to reflect course instruction and implementation in what they perceived as a positive light, rather than providing actual course practices. Another limitation is the low response rate. However, although the response rate was very low (16.5%), the respondents represent a comprehensive range of institutions by size, scope, and location. Still, given the low response rate, questions arise concerning differences between responders and non-responders on motivational and personality factors.

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