Decolonizing Mental Health Counseling Pedagogy through Student Engagement

Embedding RCT into the Teaching Internship in Counselor Education

There are mounting concerns about the domination of colonial ideology in mental health counseling education and practice. Guided by current ethical guidelines, the philosophy of decolonizing pedagogy, and anonymous student feedback, the authors launched a project to engage counselors-in-training (CITs) in the program's efforts to decolonize curriculum. Specifically, the CITs drew on their personal and professional experiences to generate de-identified case studies depicting hypothetical persons from a wide range of marginalized backgrounds. These case studies are being used across curriculum to address identities that have been traditionally unexamined. Implications regarding training and research are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Colonization is characterized by enforcement of ideologies by the dominant culture to maintain normalcy, power, and privilege (Singh et al., 2020). American institutions of higher education have been complicit in colonization through their acquisition of indigenous lands, use of enslaved people as laborers in their construction, and reliance on wealth accumulated through colonization (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021). Furthermore, institutions of higher education have viewed Western knowledge as universal, thereby continually supporting colonial worldviews and maintaining systemic oppression (Stein, 2022). This domination of colonization is reflected in the fields of mental health counseling and counselor education, which are centered on colonized experiences (Goodman et al., 2015). The influence of colonized perspectives can be seen in the textbooks, pedagogy, and case studies used in preparing clinical mental health counselors (Chung & Bemark, 2012; Goodman et al., 2015; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). The need for decolonization in counselor education is urgent in eliminating the persistent inequities and expanding access to opportunity for marginalized individuals and communities.

RELEVANT RESEARCH AND LITERATURE SUPPORT

Multiculturalism in counselor education is heavily based on colonial ideology and, "…can replicate the power arrangements that they ought to be dismantling…" (Gorski & Goodman, 2015; p. 2). To illustrate, multicultural training in counselor education evidences essentialism through the primary focus on superficial and pathological aspects of marginalized client groups to prepare White counselors (Dunn et al., 2014; Seward, 2014). Training content and process appear to have focused exclusively on preparing White counselors and disregarded the training needs of students of color (Pulliam et al., 2019). Similarly, binary conceptions of race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, etc. are widely prevalent in training and are a byproduct of the colonial ideology (Middleton et al., 2023; Shirazi, 2011).

Recently there has been an increasing shift towards decolonizing curriculum (Williams et al, 2021). Decolonization aims to examine the concepts of power and access to opportunities while critically questioning and disrupting the systems and structures that maintain inequities (Hernańdez-Wolfe, 2011). Decolonizing pedagogies involves setting the historical context of colonial relations of power and privilege for critically understanding where we are now – in present times – to understand how we might move forward together in healthy and respectful

relationships (Gorski & Goodman, 2015). Thus, decolonization pushes past multicultural and social justice approaches through its focus on differences of power, access, and opportunity (Gorski & Goodman, 2015).

The current project aimed to decolonize traditional counselor education practices by incorporating counselors-in-training (CITs) in crafting a generation of case studies to supplement course materials. The objectives of this project were two-fold: (1) to challenge the colonial ideas and practices in counselor education that subjugate student perspectives, and (2) to intentionally enrich course materials that depict wider perspectives of discrimination, bias, and privilege.

RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT/KNOWLEDGE GAP

In counselor preparation, decolonization requires critically analyzing and challenging hierarchical structures that perpetuate inequities and injustices (Hernández-Wolfe, 2011). Preparing effective and social justice-oriented counselors requires a paradigm shift in training wherein diverse student voices are centered (Chung & Bemark, 2012). Historically, education of counselors has relied on the banking concept wherein, "Knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing…" (Freire, 1970/2006, p. 107). The banking concept mirrors the oppressive society we live in (Freire, 1970/2006). On the contrary, student engagement in curriculum development has been demonstrated to be a particularly effective strategy for decolonizing pedagogy as it leads to disruption of the established power dynamics in the classroom (Louie et al., 2017).

DESCRIPTION OF TEACHING INNOVATION/INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

In 2019, the counseling program faculty at a public institution of higher education in the northeast region of the United Sates launched the Diversity Initiatives Action Plan (DIAP) informed by recent sociopolitical events, advances in the field, American Counseling Association ethical guidelines (ACA, 2014), and a philosophy of decolonizing pedagogy to create an inclusive and responsive program. In this plan, we employed concrete strategies to intentionally and pervasively infuse diversity and social justice considerations to prepare competent, effective, and ethical mental health counselors.

Case studies are routinely employed in counselor education programs to crystallize knowledge of abstract concepts and emphasize application to real-world scenarios. Case studies that ignore trainee perspectives fail to acknowledge trainees' own experiences with discrimination, bias, and privilege. This notion was identified to be an important target by CITs who provided anonymous feedback as part of the DIAP. In the absence of certain identities in course materials and case examples, we aimed to counter the hegemonic perspective that excludes depictions of individuals from marginalized groups. To create a meaningful training experience, the current project engaged CITs to decolonize curriculum by inviting their perspectives and lived experiences.

The current project was announced to all the current CITs who were invited to submit a brief two-page statement detailing their unique knowledge, skills, and/or lived experiences in generating case studies. Three CITs who expressed interest were provided an overview of the purpose, procedures, and goals of the project. The authors emphasized to the CITs that their participation was voluntary, and they were able to withdraw at any time without penalty. CITs were instructed to generate hypothetical case studies for didactic and experiential discussions across courses. CITs worked individually, with each other, and with program faculty throughout the process. They depicted race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion, socioeconomic status, geography, and citizenship status in these case studies along with experiences of the differently abled, individuals with non-conforming gender identities, and non-traditional relationship statuses such as polyamory. Special attention was given to intersectionality in generating these case studies (Cho et al., 2013). At the conclusion of the 16-week project, CITs were debriefed and received a modest stipend.

The three CITs generated 23 hypothetical case studies. Excerpts from case studies are presented below:

> "Ruben is a 22-year-old, cisgender, male college student from Brooklyn, NY. He was named after his paternal great-grandfather, a Cuban-born law student who fought alongside Fidel Castro. The younger Ruben does not speak Spanish and has never met his grandfather…"

> "Haruto is an 87-year-old Japanese American man. He recently lost his wife, and due to a complication of her medical condition. Haruto has moved back in with his son, Ichiro, after they went through his late wife's belongings and sold their house. Ichiro started to notice that his father was struggling to stay engaged in conversations and he was no longer doing the activities that he once enjoyed. Haruto used to write in his journal daily, and he has several boxes containing these journals in the attic. Ichiro brought these boxes down to the living room where his father was sitting and asked him if he wanted to read a few of them. Haruto picked up the journal written during the year he married his late wife. He smiled as he read through these memories. Tears welled up in his eyes as he reached for another journal written during the year that Ichiro was born …"

> "Fae is a 20-year-old transgender Mexican woman (male to female). She came out six months ago, but states that she has known she was not a boy since she was age eight. Fae saw a counselor when she turned 18 before starting hormone treatments. She is in her sophomore year of college. Fae grew up in a Catholic household …"

APPLICATION TO COUNSELOR EDUCATION

Research had demonstrated the important role of prior experiences and learned constructs in acquisition and integration of new knowledge thereby challenging the perspective of students as passive recipients of information (Zietsman & Clement, 1997). Furthermore, evidence-based teaching research highlights the importance of student-centered, active, and critical teaching practices in improving learning outcomes (Ambrose et al., 2010; Groccia & Buskist, 2011). Specifically, teaching strategies that prioritize critical engagement through

a collaborative and active learning community have been associated with superior learning outcomes (Groccia & Buskist, 2011; Wieman, 2013).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As part of ongoing ethical decision-making efforts as counselor educators, it is important to critically examine the theoretical, conceptual, and pedagogical conventions that foster knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective training of counselors. Several standards from the current *ACA Code of Ethics*: F.2.b Multicultural Issues/Diversity in Supervision, F.7.c. Infusing Multicultural issues/Diversity, F.7.f. Use of Case Examples, and F.11.c Multicultural/ Diversity Competence are directly pertinent to this project. This project was not submitted for review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) because it was not conducted with the intentional of drawing conclusions to be generalized, and it did not use a commonly accepted scientific method for the purposes of a systematic investigation (Office for Human Research Protections, 2018).

DEMONSTRATED REFLEXIVITY AND INTRAPERSONAL AWARENESS ABOUT THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE CLASSROOM

We (the first two authors who served as faculty mentors on this project) attended to our own identities, attitudes, and affective reactions during this project. We adhered to a social justice framework (Toporek & Daniels, 2018) to hold ourselves accountable, and to avoid a superficial focus on diversity that replicates existing systems of power and privilege. We reflected on and maintained awareness of our power and privilege and how they impact the learning environment and relationship with the CITs.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

We believe that commitment to decolonization begins with counselor educators reflecting on "why" they have chosen their course content and teaching methods. Counselor educators interested in implementing this project are instructed to begin by examining current practices and policies that inadvertently replicate the power structures that they aim to eradicate. Given the inherent power differential in the faculty-student relationship, readers are encouraged to stay attuned to both explicit and implicit ways CITs might feel disempowered in enacting these steps. Specific examples of efforts to disrupt the power discrepancies between the authors and CITs included having warm interactions, demonstrating genuine interest in CITs' perspectives, securing a modest stipend as a compensation for CITs' time and effort, maintaining openness to feedback, conducting frequent check-ins in relation to workload and stress created by this project, maintaining flexibility in meeting deadlines, remaining empathetic to student perspectives, challenging own emotional attachments to preconceived notions, and embracing cultural humility.

Our project grew from conversations in response to student feedback about the lack of diversity perspectives in the curriculum. Social context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in light of George Floyd's murder and institutional context of our increasingly diverse student body were critical elements. In garnering program support for our ideas, we stayed willing to be held accountable for our mistakes. Our ideas were unanimously supported by fellow faculty members. Our efforts gained funding from a college-wide committee that supports faculty scholarship activities.

The case studies students developed in our project were not meant to homogenize complex identity groups to fit simplistic identity development models. In the Cross-Cultural Counseling course, these case studies have since been used to help students formulate a detailed case conceptualization of the client's lived experiences reflecting Hays (2016) "ADDRESSING framework/model" which considers how **a**ge, developmental **d**isabilities, acquired **d**isabilities, **r**eligion, **e**thnicity, **s**exual orientation, **s**ocioeconomic status, **i**ndigenous group membership, **n**ationality, and **g**ender promoting a more complete understanding of cultural identity. The case studies also include biological indicators, psychological factors, sociocultural influence, specific etiological, maintenance and mitigation variables (Lenz & Litam, 2023); identity development models; implications of the conceptualization for the relationship between the client and the clinician; appropriate treatment goals and interventions informed by the case conceptualization and existing research; own potential biases, feelings, strengths, and blind spots resulting from own identities and/or experiences in working with this client; and steps to continually engage in cultural humility. We intend to continue to incorporate the case studies in other courses.

Case study work done in small groups that allow rich discussion and interactions has the potential to improve course content and process (Herreid, 2011). We recommend having a highly diverse group of CITs to avail themselves of a wide range of perspectives and lived experiences in the generation of case studies. In keeping with the philosophy of decolonization, we suggest the incorporation of student feedback to faculty/instructor in addition to faculty-to-student feedback and student-to-student feedback. For readers interested in implementing this intervention to a diverse group of CITs, we suggest a paradigm shift in training wherein systemic causes of human suffering are centered. We also invite counselor educators to create an environment characterized by high levels of trust wherein divergent perspectives coexist.

EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS OF TEACHING INNOVATION/ INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

The experiences of the CITs are reflected in responses to open-ended questions posed to them after the project ended. One student said, "It was an honor and a pleasure to be involved in this project." One response in particular emphasized the importance of suspending the norms of power and access that perpetuate the dominance of faculty power in curriculum development. It read, "This project was particularly attractive because it offered an opportunity to engage directly in the work of equity and inclusion by writing case studies, discussing

them with faculty and fellow students and thinking about the ways these tools might provide valuable resources in my own training."

There is limited additional evidence from this project of the effectiveness of decolonizing pedagogy by including student voice in developing case studies. However, the CITs' feedback about the project was positive. Student course evaluations that assess the role of case studies in self-awareness, awareness of worldviews, and skill development are important assessment targets. Additionally, ongoing and immediate instructor-to-student, student-to-instructor, and student-to-student feedback and assessment embedded throughout a course can enhance student learning (Dodeen, 2013; Michaelsen & Sweet, 2011; Webster et al., 2023). In addition to student learning outcomes, students' perceived belongingness and acceptance by program faculty and students is a construct that deserves attention and investigation. After all, interpersonal connection is the cornerstone of counselor education and psychotherapy.

ASSESSMENT TOOLS USED IN TEACHING INNOVATION/ INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY TO ASSESS STUDENT LEARNING

With the shift to multicultural orientation (Owen et al., 2011), CIT's cultural humility is an important assessment target. Cultural humility is marked by an other-oriented stance, self-reflection, view of others as experts on their context and intersecting identities, a lack of sense of superiority, and commitment to lifelong learning (Davis et al., 2011). Lastly, CITs' perception of their own engagement and value by program faculty is an important assessment target.

IMPLICATIONS

The current project has several implications for counselor education. One of the most substantial implications for counselor educators is the need to assess CITs' perceptions of training in relation to preparedness to work with clients from marginalized groups. In disrupting the authority differential, faculty are challenging structures of power that are inherent in counselor training with the hope that they serve as a parallel process for the therapeutic relationship between CIT and their client. Second, counselor educators are encouraged to partner with CITs to explore and understand their experiences and use this feedback to inform both course content and course delivery. Third, case studies are frequently used in counselor preparation; however, if their use is minimally examined or unexamined, we cannot ascertain their impact on student preparedness, and ultimately client outcomes.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS/LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this project are important to acknowledge. The three CITs in this project represent a self-selected sample, and the results may not be generalizable. While the three CITs represented multiple marginalized identities, they exclude other perspectives and identities. In addition, this project was conducted at a public institution of higher education in the

northeast region of the United States. These contextual factors are an important consideration for counselor education programs that serve different student populations. The project lacks quantitative data on whether the student engagement strategy leads to improved student learning outcomes and decolonization of pedagogy, and ultimately improved treatment to clients and communities. Future research could assess the impact of specific pedagogical strategies used in this project on CIT's knowledge and skills acquisition. Lastly, it is important to attend to and assess specific behaviors that are reflective of cultural humility in response to the principles and strategies employed by counselor educators (Hook et al., 2013).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The authors recommend further investigation of the impact of including CIT in designing course materials. Quantitative studies that measure the experiences of CITs, and rigorous qualitative data collection that capture the experiences of the CITs will be useful in understanding the impact of this project. Consistent with evidence-based teaching practices (Malott et al., 2014), the role of these innovative teaching strategies in facilitating CITs' cognitive learning, skill development, contextual learning (e.g., cultural humility), and long-term personal and professional practices are important research directions. Ultimately, the impact of innovative teaching practices on CITs' interactions with clients and other clinical outcomes (e.g., clinical effectiveness) is necessary. Lastly, we need to analyze the content of case studies and other teaching methods to illuminate the identities that are minimally addressed or excluded in training. Finally, we hope that other counselor educators can continue to refine these ideas to promote critical consciousness and social justice through pedagogy and practices.

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