Narrative Means to Multicultural Counseling Ends

Many cultures use narrative to pass down values and crystalize cultural identities. Multicultural counseling affirms the importance of cultural values and identities. Given the innate connection between narrative and multicultural counseling, we propose to apply narrative-based approaches in teaching multicultural counseling. Three different assignments and activities are provided as examples. Evaluation guidelines are illustrated, and implications for counselor education are discussed.

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Introduction

Narrative-based learning is a constructivist theory grounded in the belief that learning occurs from our stories (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). That is, people learn through reflecting on their experiences; they make meaning of these experiences and how they impact their identities. Counselor educators need to address and integrate issues of social justice, intersectionality, systemic oppression, and action across the counselor education curriculum (Ratts et al., 2016). In practice, multicultural counseling class often is the sole class that addresses most of these learning goals collectively, which is a tall task to accomplish in one single class. Narratives can be an effective vehicle for translating these learning goals into opportunities for reflection and meaningful experiences.

The use of narrative is common among many cultures, given that many have an oral tradition of passing down cultural values and traditions to crystallize their identities. Our stories inform our perceptions and the lens through which we view and interpret other stories and the world around us. When we examine our narratives against new information, we further analyze them through the process of critical self-reflection, gaining unique outcomes and learning to reauthor our stories (White & Epston, 1990). Through these, we can evaluate and hold different perspectives that may diverge from our own (Hutto & McGivern, 2016), resulting in growth and self-awareness. Such narrative-based pedagogy can help students learn safe and affirming strategies that can be transferred to multicultural counseling practice.

Narrative-based learning not only draws on the learner's cognitive level but engages them in a holistic and multifaceted way (Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Hutto & McGivern, 2016). It makes the material more real, immediate, and personal. When narrative-based strategies are implemented in the classroom, the learners begin to see themselves within a multilayered system through a lens of intersectionality. The learner then recognizes that their stories are part of a larger narrative from their family of origin to the different systems in Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological system model. In addition to personal self-reflection, this narrative-based learning requires an openness to hearing and experiencing other stories, just like counseling.

Within a constructivist framework, narratives facilitate the construction of knowledge and meaning through the subjective experiences of counselors and clients (Melamed et al., 2020). From our experiences in the classroom, the level of engagement influences students' learning outcomes. Students are at various developmental levels and assume different roles when in contact with individuals who are culturally different from them. We synthesized Bennett's (2017) Developmental Model of Interculturally Sensitivity to identify three different levels of contact with culturally different individuals: armchair observer, objective detectives, and immersion. In this brief, we present the application of these developmental levels in several narrative-based assignments and class activities to teach a stand-alone multicultural course and assess student learning outcomes.

Descriptions of Applying Narrative Approaches in Teaching Multicultural Counseling

Integrating narrative approaches in teaching multicultural counseling can be a powerful and transformative way for students to explore and understand the topic and themselves. We scaffold assignments and in-class activities with key narrative approach concepts that allow students to examine contemporary issues closely related to multicultural counseling through a narrative lens. The following three assignments and in-class activities align with the three developmental levels of armchair observers, objective detectives, and immersion. In introducing each assignment or the in-class activities, we describe the key concepts from the narrative approach, elaborate the rationale of the assignment or activity design, and recommend resources for implementation. We address ethical considerations as a collective because they are integrated into the assignments and activities we designed.

FISH IN THE WATER ACTIVITY AND EXTERNALIZATION.

At the beginning of the class, we do not expect students to be immediately immersed in multicultural topics. Though students are asked to read the first two chapters of two related books—*Birth of a White Nation* (Battalora, 2021) and *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018) to begin this exposure to multicultural issues, they can still developmentally be armchair observers in this process. The "Fish in the Water" activity is designed to call students' attention to the status quo and teach narrative therapy. We introduce the concept of externalization to prepare students for the activity. Externalization involves separating the person from the problem, which empowers objectifying the problem and separates oneself from the self-blaming narrative (White & Epston, 1990). Reading the description of the concept can be abstract for students. To help students understand externalization concretely, we designed an in-class activity called "Fish in the Water."

We started the activity by asking, "How can you tell fish they are in the water?" We then asked students to take two to three minutes to think about ways to tell fish they are in the water. The class would randomly be divided into two groups. One group is the "fish" group, and the other is the "messenger" group. The messenger group should try all they can to tell and convince the fish group that they are in the water. Based on the information conveyed, the fish group can decide whether to accept or reject the message. After five to ten minutes, students return as an entire group. We then ask a parallel question to bring students' awareness to a multicultural issue, "How can you tell anyone they are in the system of racism?"

The rationale for designing the "Fish in the Water" activity is twofold. First, it provides a good example of illustrating the challenge of applying externalization in therapy. Some clients are living with the problem, and just like fish in the water, it is difficult for them to see the problem while they are in it. Only when fish separate from the water do they recognize that they are

in the water. A similar process can apply to helping clients to understand they are with their problem, but they are not the problem. Secondly, the activity also intends to highlight we are living in the very system of racism. Given the ubiquitousness of the system of racism, it could be just as hard to tell fish they are in the water, similar to getting someone who is unaware to see that they are living with a system of racism. The last question of the activity guides students to reflect deeper and critically examine systematic racism in the United States. By the same token, this activity can bring awareness to other systems of oppression or injustice, for example, systematic sexism and heterosexualism, classism, to name a few. These exist similarly to racism in the United States and warrant further discussion. Given the limited space of the current issue, we will not elaborate on these.

As noted above, before the in-class activity, students must read the first two chapters from *Birth of a White Nation* (Battalora, 2021) and *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018). *Birth of a White Nation* is an excellent resource for understanding the historical background of the system of racism and how it was built to benefit a selected group of individuals (Battalora, 2021). *White Fragility* is a helpful guide in identifying some of the challenges of having a genuine conversation about racism with white individuals (DiAngelo, 2018). Discussion questions at the end of each chapter in *Birth of a White Nation* can also be a good resource for facilitating the discussion on racism (Battalora, 2021).

PERSONAL MULTICULTURAL NARRATIVE, DECONSTRUCTION OF DOMINANT DISCOURSES, PREFERRED STORIES, AND RE-AUTHORING.

Developmentally speaking, students become more equipped to examine some of the dominant discourse as the semester progresses. Following the examination, they might emerge as objective detectives (Bennett, 2017) to multicultural issuers. The personal multicultural narrative assignment integrates several key concepts from narrative-based learning and provides students with an opportunity to be objective detectives. To understand the prompts in the assignments, each concept is first introduced. Concepts build on each other to guide students in writing their multicultural narratives.

The concept of deconstruction of dominant discourses from a narrative approach encourages individuals to actively engage in a critical analysis of dominant cultural and societal narratives that might contribute to or even exacerbate an individual's problems (White & Epston, 1990). The deconstruction of dominant discourses aims to prepare to select individuals' preferred stories as their new narratives. Preferred stories support individuals in exploring narratives that they choose and challenge problem-saturated stories. (White & Epston, 1990). After the identification of preferred stories, the act of re-authoring follows. Re-authoring is the re-writing or re-storying of individuals' narratives that emphasizes strengths, resilience, and preferred ways of being (White & Epston, 1990). The process of re-writing one's narratives helps to shift the focus from problem-saturated stories to more resourceful narratives. The assignment of the personal multicultural narrative addresses the re-authoring process for

students. By identifying resources and stories from their intersecting identities, students are then able to create a personal narrative that is now multilayered.

The personal multicultural narrative has three major prompts that address the three aforementioned narrative approach concepts. First, to deconstruct the existing discourses, students reflect on how their cultural beliefs, values, and traditions have impacted their understanding of diversity. Second, students need to answer how their cultural background and positionalities would impact their work with a diverse clientele. This is a way to ask students to construct their preferred stories. Third, students can re-author their experience by describing the connection between their cultural experience and the role of counselors in promoting self-awareness, social justice, and advocacy.

Like other assignments and class activities, the personal multicultural narrative's rationale is twofold. One is to create opportunities for students to learn the skill of applying narrative approach concepts in their clinical practice. The other is to help students to understand multicultural issues. In addition, the personal multicultural narrative is an assignment in which students actively engage in the deconstruction of dominant discourses and the construction of their narratives. The process of writing transforms abstract concepts into a direct experience to which students can connect. Through this assignment, students can experience narratives' empowering aspects.

Resources are available to instructors interested in implementing this assignment in their multicultural counseling course. White and Epston's (1990) classic book on narrative therapy, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, is one of the books that can provide a solid introduction to the fundamental concepts of narrative approach. Freedman and Combs' (1996) book can be a good resource to illustrate the social construction of preferred stories. While Ratts et al. (2016) article on multicultural and social justice counseling competencies provides guidelines for students and instructors to make connections between multicultural counseling and the narrative approach.

CULTURAL IMMERSION EXPERIENCE, THICK DESCRIPTION AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The previous activities and assignments are to prepare students to be developmentally ready to immerse themselves in a culture that is different from theirs. As such, they prepare the students for the cultural immersion experience, the culminating assignment for this course. The cultural immersion connects with the narrative approach concepts described above. In addition, the thick description of the narrative approach and the intersectionality from the legal studies field (Crenshaw, 2013) add extra layers to guide students in this assignment. Thick description explores the details and nuances of individuals' narratives, which helps in understanding the context, feelings, and meanings associated with the individuals' experiences (White & Epston, 1990). The cultural immersion experience assignment aims to guide students in understanding the cultural contexts within which they will be immersed. It also requires

them to examine their feelings and reflect on meanings that emerge for themselves in these different cultural contexts where they might be a minority.

The cultural immersion experience has three parts that connect with three different facets of thick description. First, students must submit a proposal and action plan identifying the culturally diverse settings they want to immerse themselves in. In this proposal, they also reflect on identified biases and assumptions that they hold towards this group. Asking students to write the proposal and action plan prepares them before entering unfamiliar cultural settings. If students are moving too fast in confronting settings that might be triggering to them, instructors can ask students to revise or change the plan to protect students. Second, following their action plans, students will go to the proposed settings to immerse themselves in them. As they go in, students will observe and monitor their feelings throughout the entire experience. Their feelings will eventually contribute to the thick description of their cultural immersion experience. Third, a cultural immersion report and a presentation are the two outputs that culminate their experience. In the report and presentation, students will explore the meanings of the cultural immersion experience on their personal cultural awareness, identities, relationships, and mental health.

Several resources are prudent to the thick description and cultural immersion experience project. Geertz's (2008) seminal work on thick description is a good starting point for understanding thick description and interpretative theory of culture. Ponterotto (2006) offers a brief overview of the evolution of thick description as a research concept from anthropology to other disciplines. White (2007) provides good examples of how multiple layers of narratives can be therapeutic and enhance one's personal awareness in various domains of daily life. The seminal work of Crenshaw (2013) on intersectionality stressed that individuals might experience multiple forms of discrimination, disadvantage, and oppression simultaneously. In a way, thick description is a vehicle for carrying the intersectionality of individuals to the forefront.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

We take a developmental perspective in our teaching to foster diversity and inclusion. Many discussions in multicultural counseling classes can be triggering. Students are developmentally different in their awareness and comfort level when confronting multicultural issues. To foster diversity, inclusion, and emotional safety, we identify different developmental levels and scaffold assignments to reduce the students' potential anxiety and encourage students to engage in conversation on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and many other contemporary issues. Other courses can use this model to infuse multicultural issues addressed in the American Counseling Association (ACA) *Code of Ethics* F.7.c and Multicultural Diversity Competence F.11.c as required for counselor education and supervision (ACA, 2014).

The use of narratives demonstrated through the three assignments and activities reflects one of the core values of the American Counseling Association, which is, "…honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential and uniqueness

of people within their social and cultural contexts" (ACA, 2014, p. 3). This also advances the concept of intersectionality as an integral component in addressing diversity and inclusion in the course design. Given the complex nature of intersectionality, we are sensitive to students' emotional reactions to different multicultural topics. We posit that narrative therapy can be sensitive to the intersections of culture, race, gender, sexuality, and other identity factors. Regardless of developmental level, when students can find ways to create their narratives, they are better connected to these topics. Narrative creation is a way of finding and expressing one's voice, which in itself holds a space for students' emotions. Therefore, the integration of narrative approach in teaching multicultural counseling is a natural result.

Evaluation of Effectiveness of Instruction and Assessment of Students' Learning

Qualitative evaluation of students' learning outcomes aligns better with the constructivist theoretical foundation of narrative-based teaching and learning. We applied Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) to guide the evaluation design. The ZPD helped us to gauge students' understanding and work through multicultural goals that were appropriate to their development stages. ZPD assists in scaffolding the learning and evaluation of students' level of multicultural awareness. This approach helps students first understand their development levels and then identify attainable goals using multiple layers of narratives in class.

To assist students in understanding their levels of development, we synthesized Bennett's (2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity to identify three different levels of contact with culturally different individuals. They are armchair observer, objective detectives, and immersion. These three different levels of contact become possible goals for students to examine their level of understanding and comfort regarding multicultural issues. In reaching an immersion, narratives constructed and co-constructed in this class serve as vehicles for students. The assignments and in-class activities that we described align with these three development levels, each serving as a building block for the following one. We scaffold contents and assignments when teaching this course. The degree of active involvement and elements of development are two major determinants of evaluating students' learning. The following table illustrates the three developmental levels, their determinants, and some examples of developmental elements.

Table 1 *Developmental Levels of Contact with Culturally Different*

Developmental Levels	Degree of active involvement	Elements of development	Examples of developmental elements
Level One: Arm-chair observer	Low level of active involvement; exposure from a "*safe distance*"; distance usually cognitive in nature; presents little or no threat to the participant. Low knowledge of self, depth of cultural information, knowledge of helping skills.	Observational Least amount of threat and challenge; maintain safe distance; low level of initiation to new ideas.	Film, tapes, readings that depict cultural practices of an ethnic minority group. Attend a lecture that focuses on ethnic minority issues and concepts. Make a tour of an ethnic community and describe it, including quality of homes, condition of yards, streets, sidewalks, behaviors of the people. Notice the number of telephone booths, recreational facilities, pharmacies, medical clinics, and any unique aspects of community you may observe. Attend a church service of a predominant ethnic minority group.
Level Two: Objective detective	Medium level of active involvement; involves contact with minorities though information gathering process from closer distance; participant learner gains insight and knowledge about culturally different groups. Medium knowledge of self, depth of cultural information, knowledge of helping skills.	Investigative Gathering information about self & others; diagnose and scrutinize situations; contemplation.	Conducting interviews with community leaders and other key individuals within group (ministers, politicians, teachers, etc.) and try to determine their perceptions of the needs and concerns of the ethnic group they represent. Interview members of ethnic groups at a college setting regarding their needs & most critical issues. Interview members of a minority community in your city finding out about their concerns, needs, outlooks, etc.
Level Three: Immersion.	High level of active involvement High level of self-knowledge, depth of cultural information, knowledge of helping skills Opportunity for trainees to encounter a cross-cultural experience at more personal level; trainees able to confront and explore their own blocks, hang ups, doubts, fears and anxieties with regard to culturally diverse populations; able to gain more accurate knowledge and understanding of others by feeling free to raise and explore personal questions, issues, and concerns.	Transforming participant Greater challenge; transforms self and others; action is catalyst for change; awareness of self with biases and inadequacies.	Personal and intimate contact; involvement in lifestyles; authentic communication; affiliation with the other. Arrange to spend a weekend in the home of an ethnic family in your community engaging in and inquiring about lifestyles, customs, traditions, family practices, disciplinary procedures, roles of the family members, needs, concerns, etc. Become a genuine friend of an ethnic or cultural minority person.

The table serves two purposes. First, it is to scaffold students in the instruction process. Second, it provides a roadmap so that students can be aware of their pace and the possible goals that they want to reach. In either case, the table is a tool rather than a sorting hat to

categorize students' development. In many cases, students can potentially have different degrees of active involvement and elements of development across different developmental levels. We recommend a holistic approach to evaluating and assessing students' development levels in multicultural counseling and related competencies. By holistic, we specifically mean consider students as whole persons in their own unique cultural contexts with rich experiences in their own lives. And yes, by holistic, we also refer to fears, anxieties, and other emotions that speak about different parts of students.

Implications for Counselor Education

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Several unanswered questions emerge in the integration of narrative-based approach in teaching and learning in a multicultural counseling course. One main question is to what degree a student can be expected to develop in a short time of taking a multicultural counseling course, especially given the complexities and richness of multicultural counseling in contemporary times. Another question is around addressing students' potential emotional reactions that might emerge as they engage with individuals who are culturally different from them and content that challenges their worldview. Conversely, a potential limitation is that some aspects of students' cultural experiences and reactions might not be fully addressed in the course, because of the complexity of multicultural counseling and the dynamic of cultural contacts and limited course time. By taking a holistic view of students' development, we intend to empower students to take ownership of their development and journeys in cultural engagement and immersion to address this limitation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

More research is needed to understand and examine effective elements of integrating narrative-based approaches in teaching multicultural counseling classes. For example, potential conceptual work exploring the theoretical alignment between narrative therapy and multicultural counseling is one of the future directions. Empirical research on identifying key elements of effective instruction is another path worth investigating. Despite the unanswered questions and potential limitations, the work of promoting multicultural counseling with cultural humility is a vital topic that researchers and practitioners need to continue co-constructing in the field.

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