An International Study Abroad Experience in a Counselor Education Doctoral Cohort

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As one component of a doctoral level course, the importance of multicultural competencies has been emphasized particularly in the areas of counseling and counselor education (Boysen & Vogel, 2008; Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001; Dickson, Jepsen, & Barbee, 2008). Therefore, the perceptions and experiences of six doctoral counselor education students who traveled to Puebla, Mexico, are explored in this phenomenological research. As a result of their participation in a variety of assignments and cultural immersion activities, the following themes emerged: Respect for Hispanic traditions; revised professional perceptions; an awareness of services abroad; and the impact of experiential learning. In particular, the importance of experiential learning and multicultural competencies for counselors and counselor educators are discussed.

Suggested reference:


Keywords: Study abroad, Cultural immersion, Multicultural, Experiential learning

In our ever changing society that has become a melting pot for cultures and diverse populations throughout the world, cultural competence has been described as the fourth force of the counseling profession (Pedersen, 1991). Therefore, the ability for mental health professionals to work with people from diverse backgrounds is crucial (Dickson, Jepsen, & Barbee, 2008). According to Burn (1992), counselors have been compelled to develop their own philosophies given that clients, members from diverse populations, and the profession itself are placed at risk with regard to culturally insensitive and biased professionals (Boysen & Vogel, 2008).

Counselor educators have been assigned the task of educating new professionals pertaining to multiculturalism and diversity in the helping profession. For example, Steward, Morales, Bartell, Miller, and Weeks (1998) found that one-third of the students who participated in their study perceived of exposure to multicultural literature as being meaningless and unnecessary. Steward et al. further stated that students are being exposed to literature that has little influence pertaining to their cultural sensitivity; still, they are...
able to excel through coursework while rejecting the concepts of multiculturalism and diverse clients. Although study abroad programs are important in preparation for culturally diverse work settings, the experience does not guarantee multicultural competence (Phillion et al., 2008). For example, counselor education faculty members are responsible for emphasizing the importance of multiculturalism and for teaching new counselors about the importance of developing professional diverse population philosophies (Burn, 1992; Dickson et al., 2008).

According to Diaz-Lazaro and Cohen (2001), cross-cultural exposure is essential in developing culturally competent counselors by implementing ethnic contact into multicultural courses. To illustrate, Dickson et al. (2008) observed that social sensitivity among students was impacted by the cultural ambiance of counselor education programs they attended. In addition, Dickson et al. found that students benefitted from experiential learning, participatory training strategies, and cultural exposure outside of the classroom. In Diaz-Lazaro and Cohen’s study, students acknowledged the need to establish more relationships and interactions with members of culturally diverse groups. In other words, establishing such relationships were perceived as being helpful in forming culturally competent counselors.

Cultural learning experiences as well as cultural involvement have been utilized to assist counselors in developing and expanding their knowledge of diverse populations (Canfield, Low, & Hovestadt, 2009). According to Dickson et al. (2008), cultural exposure and experiential learning are important factors in developing culturally-competent counselors. Therefore, the purpose of our study is to explore the cultural experiences encountered by a cohort of doctoral students who travelled to Puebla, Mexico, for a multicultural counseling course sponsored by a CACREP accredited counselor education program.

**Conceptual Framework**

Although there is minimal literature pertaining to study abroad programs within counselor education programs, there is, however, information available regarding intercultural development in teacher education programs. For example, Milton Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was utilized to assess how cross-cultural experiences enhanced students’ levels of intercultural development. Specifically, six stages within the DMIS detail an individual’s move from ethnocentric to ethno relative thinking. The three ethnocentric stages are denial, defense, and minimization that represent ways in which an individual avoids cultural difference “by denying its existence, by raising defenses against it, or by minimizing its importance” (Bennett, 2004, p. 63).

Conversely, ethnomrelative thinking consists of three stages that include acceptance, adaptation, and integration in which an individual seeks cultural difference “by accepting its importance, by adapting a perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of identity” (Bennett, 2004, p. 63). It is through intercultural experiences that an individual will navigate through these stages. Bennett

explained that an intercultural experience “generates pressure for change in one’s worldview... because the default ethnocentric worldview while sufficient for managing relations within one’s own culture, is inadequate to the task of developing and maintaining social relations across cultural boundaries” (p. 74). The DMIS is also the theoretical basis for the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a 50-item instrument used to measure an individual’s worldview towards cultural differences (Emert & Pearson, 2007).

Over the past few decades, there has been a push to develop culturally competent counselors and counselor educators. Despite the fact that counselor educator programs were designed to provide students with learning experiences, coordinating such experiences are often difficult when taken from a programmatic standpoint. For example, some doctoral students may experience high levels of excitement when becoming immersed in a new culture, whereas others may feel intimidated and exhibit periods of anxiety. Although locating counselor education programs with study abroad components built into their curriculum is difficult, there are, however, those that exist (Alexander, Kruczek, & Ponterotto, 2005; Canfield et al., 2009).

In a study conducted by Fairchild, Pillai, and Noble (2006), they determined that a student’s cultural competence and knowledge of multiculturalism can be enhanced by experiential learning. Amegago (2009) further noted that insight into a culture being studied can be gained through study abroad experiences. During these processes, counselors and counselor educators have the opportunity to face their own cultural biases and beliefs. Mehta (2011) concluded that skilled professionals of counseling education programs must take responsibility and implement culturally inclusive frameworks when working with counselor trainees.

**Review of Relevant Literature**

To better inform counselors and counselor educators in becoming more culturally skilled, literature pertaining to culture, multiculturalism, and diversity has been published at great length (Canfield et al., 2009; Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001; Kitsantas, 2004; Smith, Ng, Brinson, & Mityagin, 2008). According to Dickson et al. (2008), experiential learning is an important aspect of developing culturally-competent counselors. In particular, study-abroad programs are utilized to create cultural learning experiences in order to help counseling students understand global perspectives (Kitsantas, 2004). Keeping this in mind, our study was conducted in order to provide information regarding cultural immersion as a learning experience and study-abroad programs as a means of educating novice counselors and developing cultural competencies.

**Cultural Immersion as a Learning Experience**

Although research regarding cultural immersion in relation to study-abroad programs is scarce, a few studies (Alexander, Kruczek, & Ponterotto, 2005; Canfield et al. 2009) are available in which cultural immersion is examined as a learning experience pertaining to counselors. For example, Canfield et al. (2009) conducted a study involving

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graduate students who participated in cultural immersion as one component of the Cross-Cultural Issues in Counseling course. As a result, they spent four weeks in Mexico during which time they compared the differences between rural, urban, and tourist community environments. The program was later adapted to include a two-week study abroad course in Thailand. In addition, another study abroad program in Scotland was coordinated by a group of counselor educators based on the original program in Mexico. Although Canfield et al. described different types of cultural components that were added to all of the courses (i.e., face-to-face, online, and study abroad), students who participated in the study abroad component reflected on their travels as being transformational. In addition, statements written in journals were indicative of students who were processing their cultural experiences as both individuals and as members of the helping profession.

Selecting a country to represent a study abroad program has sometimes proven to be difficult due to language barriers, financial constraints, and contact with professionals in other countries. Thus, steps to implement university study abroad programs have been outlined. As an example, Alexander et al. (2005) selected the country of Trinidad and solicited participants by advertising and creating an application process. As a result, ten students were chosen to participate in the study abroad program after successfully completing a set of required experiential learning assignments and lessons. In addition, a minimum of 25 hours of either individual or group counseling experience were required while in Trinidad. Live observations were made by the program’s instructor and counselors from the host country evaluated the participants on components that involved working with diverse populations. Despite the limited information available regarding cultural immersion and counselor education study abroad programs, Dickson et al. (2008) noted that experiential learning and providing a positive cultural environment develops culturally competent counselors.

**Intercultural Development**

According to Mark and Moss (2011), immersion experiences alone are not sufficient enough to change an individual’s intercultural development; rather, cultural reflection is essential in advancing this process. To illustrate, cultural reflection was mediated by a guide in one study abroad program who served as a translator and supporter of the participant’s intercultural growth. Through journaling and personal dialogue with the cultural guide, the participant was able to freely discuss with her guide any perceptions, misconceptions, and/or cultural dissonance she was experiencing. As a result, the guide instructed her on how to become culturally reflective by pointing out the importance of not judging events she was witnessing by standards taken from a United States’ perspective; instead, she was advised to be ever mindful that the classroom teachings were being conducted by a British teacher in an inner city Britain school.

Through immersion activities and learning cultural reflective thinking processes, significant intercultural challenges were faced, intercultural sensitivity was gained, and an ethnorelative worldview was developed (Marx & Moss, 2011). Utilizing the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) and Bennett’s DMIS as a conceptual framework, Mark and

Moss (2011) found that participants' intercultural development was positively influenced by her experiences within a study abroad program. Essentially, the participant served as an observer in an authentic London classroom where she was able to witness the dynamics between teacher and students. At the onset of her experiences, the cultural differences she faced caused her anxiety, miscommunication, and misunderstanding, yet led to cultural discoveries as well. Due to the fact that the participant was immersed into another culture, she was forced to confront the reality of fundamental ethnic differences. Basically, her own cultural assumptions in regard to teaching and learning were vastly different from those she was experiencing within the teacher education program abroad. Thus, experiential learning and cultural competence are important aspects of counselor education programs taught abroad.

In order to demonstrate the importance of study abroad programs at the post-secondary level, Emert and Pearson (2007) administered the IDI to 88 community college students enrolled in an Education for Global Learning (EGL) program in Costa Rica and to 43 students enrolled in the Oxford University program. The participants took the IDI first as a pretest prior to venturing into the study abroad program and again as a posttest upon their return from the host country. By assessing the pre- and posttest results, Emert and Pearson found that intercultural competence growth was present in all the students; however, their ethnocentric tendencies were reduced. Although the scores remained within the minimum range, this indicated that students' experiences abroad fostered a greater awareness of culturally diverse individuals which led Emert and Pearson to conclude that intercultural competence is often developed over an extended period of time in order for there to be a significant shift in worldviews. In other words, the broadening of one's worldview through substantive interactive experiences with culturally diverse individuals is the value of study abroad programs.

**Study Abroad Programs**

A major tenet of study abroad programs is to improve participants' multicultural and global competence (Fairchild et al., 2006). Study abroad programs are utilized by institutes of higher learning to encourage multicultural competence, global awareness, and appreciation of other cultures (Amegago, 2009; Fairchild et al., 2006; Kitsantas, 2004). Essentially, researchers (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Fairchild et al., 2006; Kitsantas, 2004; Sell, 1983) concluded that students' goals to participate in a study abroad program positively impacted their cultural development. For example, Kitsantas (2004) found that students whose goals consisted of gaining cross-cultural skills, global understanding, and becoming more knowledgeable in their fields also reported higher levels of both cross-cultural skills and global understanding. In addition, Fairchild, Pillai, and Noble (2006) utilized a mixed methodology to assess participants' levels of multicultural awareness both before and after their study abroad experience. Specifically, participants shared in focus group discussions and were administered the Multicultural Awareness/Knowledge/Skills Survey (MAKSS). Following the study abroad experiences, Fairchild et al. noted that the students had acquired positive changes in their attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge.
pertaining to multiculturalism. Similarly, Mehta (2011) reported that “counselor trainees who participated in an international immersion experienced varying degrees of sustained change both personally and professionally” (p. 216).

The influence of students’ knowledge regarding multiculturalism was strengthened through experiential learning experiences (Fairchild et al., 2006). In other words, study abroad programs effectively facilitate multicultural awareness by enhancing learning experiences while helping novice counselors and counselor educators to face their own cultural biases and beliefs. Traveling to field locations for the purpose to observe, participate, and interact with local people also provide study abroad participants further insights into the culture being studied (Amegago, 2009). In order to increase the effectiveness of a study abroad program, the focus is placed on a particular community (minus tourism), a minimal number of English speakers, and direct interaction with native individuals (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). In addition to field experiences, Kitsantas (2004) suggested the need for cultural training involving participants before departure (i.e., introducing the importance of the culture, cultural differences, and adjustment concerns). Participants also reported that background information related to the study abroad experience, development of language skills, and research projects greatly assisted them in receiving the most benefit from the program (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005).

Building upon Engle and Engle’s (2003) premise, study abroad programs should have increased levels of immersion, be informative in relation to what a student should expect, and be evaluated by the students’ experiences rather than by the number of participants. From another viewpoint, McLeod and Wainwright (2009) utilized social learning theory to answer fundamental questions regarding how a study abroad program affects a student’s personality, social adjustment, and academic performance. Basically, they used social learning theory due to its locus of control concept wherein people can make a connection between what they do and what happens to them. By conducting focus groups with American college students in the final stages of the study abroad experiences, four themes emerged: (a) students experienced stressful situations that severely violated their expectancies; (b) successful experiences led to students’ feelings of increased self-confidence; (c) successful experiences led to students’ changes in self-perception; and (d) successful experiences led to changes in students’ perceptions of the world. Finally, the study abroad participants realized that violation of their expectancies and being forced out of their comfort zones in order to take risks were positive learning experiences.

Methodology

To gain a deeper understanding of how six doctoral students became professionally influenced by their participation in an international study abroad program, Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach was utilized in our study. According to Giorgi (2008), the goal of a phenomenological study is to understand a person’s lived experiences in relation to his/her culture or group. In effect, this method allows the researcher to engage in the process of phenomenological reduction or describing things as they are perceived without reference to whether what is experienced is objectively real.

Thus, articulation of the participants ‘lived experiences yields the essence or meaning attached to the phenomenon.

The purpose of our study was to understand how the perceptions of doctoral counseling students participating in an international study abroad program impacted them professionally. Therefore, we focused on providing an answer to the following research question: “How does the experience of participating in an international study abroad program impact doctoral students’ cultural perceptions related to the field of counseling?”

Participants

After obtaining approval from the university’s institutional review board (IRB) to conduct our study, participants were provided with a copy of the informed consent document that was read to them and any questions were answered. In addition, the purpose of our study, the right to withdraw from taking part without penalty, data collection procedures, confidentiality, and the risks and benefits associated with the study were fully described.

A sample of doctoral students volunteered to take part in our study in order to share their observations while enrolled in an international study abroad course. Participants were first asked to complete a demographic questionnaire that included information regarding their age, race, marital status, gender, doctoral semester hours completed, and socioeconomic status. To ensure confidentiality, each one chose an individual pseudonym. Next, the participants answered questions regarding their cultural perceptions involving international study abroad experiences.

Participants were chosen utilizing Maxwell’s (2005) criterion-based selection procedure: all students were enrolled in an international study abroad program as a component of their doctoral program designed to enhance multicultural awareness. Due to the qualitative design of our study, a small number of participants (N = 6) were appropriate (Giorgi, 2008) consisting of middle class females ranging in age from 27 to 52. With regard to ethnicity, the participants were evenly matched: Black (n = 2); White (n = 2); and Hispanic (n = 2). Similarly, three participants were married, and three were single. Finally, all were members of a doctoral counseling cohort having completed an average of 30 semester hours at a public university.

Data Collection

In keeping with Maxwell (2005), collecting data from numerous sources and using different methods reduces the risk of bias and provides the researcher with a clearer understanding of the phenomenon. In order to account for researcher bias, we therefore bracketed our own personal experiences of having had participated in an international study-abroad program and how our lives were impacted through the experiences. Prior to constructing interview questions, we consulted with one another and shared how our participation in a study abroad program influenced our multicultural competence. In
addition, we offered modifications that might possibly be adapted in our counseling practices.

In order to record the perceptions of our participants' lived experiences, we conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews. During each interview, field notes describing their behaviors and mannerisms were also recorded in an effort to detect any emotions that might accompany their stories. In addition to interviews, two participants used journaling to share their experiences; thus, we were able to examine their journals as a method to reinforce themes. Low inference descriptors also assisted us in ensuring that the participant’s perceptions were depicted in a straightforward manner. Specifically, low inference descriptors were utilized by selecting verbatim quotes that highlighted the participants’ thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Johnson, 1997). In reporting the results, thick descriptions were used to capture the true essence of the themes. Thus, significant statements and low inference descriptors were considered to be data in which themes could then be constructed based on the overall essence of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

After each individual interview was audio recorded, it was transcribed and checked for accuracy. Upon completion of this procedure, the audio recordings were destroyed to protect each participant’s anonymity. In order to fully understand the doctoral students’ perceptions and thoughts regarding their study abroad experiences, each one was asked five grand tour questions (i.e., a type of descriptive inquiry that provides information pertaining to an experience or phenomenon) which created an opportunity for other questions to be answered as a means to gain more information. According to Spradley (1979), grand tour questions constitute an emergent quality of the interview process that results in subsequent questions. For example, subsequent interview questions were adapted from relevant literature (Mark & Moss, 2011; McLeod & Wainwright, 2009) and used to discover the essence of the first research question: (a) How has the experience of participating in an international study abroad program impacted your collegiate experience? (b) What about your international study abroad program’s impact on your knowledge of the country’s culture? (c) What about your experience in participating in an international study abroad program and how it shaped your idea of counseling individuals from that culture? (d) How has your knowledge of individuals from another culture changed as a result of your experiences in the international study abroad program?, and (e) What impact has this international study abroad program had on you as a professional in the field of counseling?

Data Analysis

In order to identify themes contained in the data, Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was utilized. Researchers gather information in order to understand the essence of a participant’s experience when employing this method. In our study, the data analysis process included the discovery of significant statements that were merged into themes. Thus, we were able to describe the essence of the participants’ experiences. Through an analysis of two participants’ daily journals, we examined their

cultural and professional experiences in order to discover implicit meanings ascribed to participating in an international study-abroad program.

Limitations/Delimitations

Similar to other qualitative studies, our study was intended to provide insight related to the cultural experiences of a group of doctoral students enrolled in a counselor education program. Therefore, our manuscript presented each participant’s words in terms of events experienced during the international study-abroad course. Assumedly, the information provided was factual, and the participants were honest concerning their actual perceptions and life experiences. Given that all six participants were enrolled in the same counselor education doctoral program, our results can be used to inform research and practice in other counselor education programs.

Of particular note, participants in our study included all females; therefore, the results may not be transferable to males who participate in study abroad courses. As authors of this study, however, we are also members of the international study abroad course. For this reason, we consulted with one another on a regular basis in an attempt to eradicate any personal feelings or perceptions that could possibly account for biases.

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology focuses on describing the participants’ experiences and spoken words. Researchers utilize this method as a way to engage in epoch, or bracketing, in which one’s own experiences are set aside in order to gain a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon being studied.

Implementation

As a component of the counselor education doctoral program located at the university in which the participants attended, an international study abroad trip is a requirement used to enhance multicultural awareness and competencies. Essentially, the program encompasses several aspects of counseling and is applicable to students in various areas, namely school counseling, community counseling, or private practice. In the case of our study, students were required to participate in experiential learning through cultural encounters that would expose them to the mental health profession in Mexico. Specifically, students were required to attend and take part in various activities (i.e., a graduate research exchange seminar; cultural learning experiences; touring private and public mental health and social services facilities; participate in learning opportunities at private and public school settings; and interact with children and staff at a local orphanage). Each student was given an assignment that included keeping a daily journal in which impressions, issues, problem-solving/decision-making examples, and questions were recorded. In addition, each student kept a log of service hours with a minimum of 25 clock hours. Finally, students were assigned to translate their experiences into research for a professional publication or presentation.

Results

The participants in our study described their cultural experiences that included four themes gleaned from their international study abroad trip to Puebla, Mexico. In particular, students expressed (a) their respect for the Hispanic culture; (b) a revised professional perception; (c) an awareness of services abroad; and (d) the impact of experiential learning.

Respect for Hispanic Culture

All six doctoral students expressed how their participation in the international study abroad course warranted a greater respect and understanding of the Hispanic people and culture. For example, Ruth described her perceptions in the following way:

An impact for me was our visit to the place where we saw all that was done with a cactus, what was done with the dye, and the pyramids. It showed me how smart people are, it showed me that no matter what country or culture there are brilliant people that do brilliant things.

Ann detailed the importance of understanding and appreciating the customs and values of the people by stating: “The people are accustomed to their own culture and values. You have to be sensitive to what they might be used to and what they are expecting and just be cognizant of the differences in the cultures.” In continuing the discussion, Sharon noted:

I was always aware of the importance of family in the Mexican culture. However, while visiting Mexico I was able to see firsthand how families worked together. While visiting the schools, we were told that the parents are a large portion of the staff. Parents come in to cook meals and they are financially supportive. This also helped me to realize the cohesive nature of the Mexican culture. In America we are socialized to be independent. However, in Mexico they seem to be socialized to work together and depend on one another.

The experiences shared by Ruth, Ann, and Sharon help to support the idea that cultural immersion experiences help to develop ethnic competencies and provide an awareness of others (Canfield et al., 2009).

Other students emphasized the importance of respect for the Hispanic culture. For example, Lisa gained a heightened sense of admiration for the people:

Certainly it brought greater awareness of the Hispanic culture and the country of Mexico, whether it is socially, politically, or educational. I don’t think that I was necessarily aware of. It was amazing how hospitable the Mexican people are as demonstrated by the lunch they served us at the school of technology. I had the
impression that this was a very poor school, yet they were very quick to offer and give what they had.

Marie further disclosed, “The experience reaffirmed my beliefs about the culture, in that they are very warm and generous, they try to be as helpful as they can.” Similarly, Katie described her thoughts in somewhat more detail:

There needs to be more understanding and more patience when working with people who were not born in the United States. There also needs to be more awareness of differences and to break some of those stereotypes.

According to Wilson (1993), experiences abroad can lead to personal growth and interpersonal relationships. In relation to the participants in our study, having the patience and ability to understand the Hispanic culture helped to generate increased respect as well as an improved personal and professional cultural perception.

Revised Professional Perceptions

The goal of participating in an international study abroad course is to enhance the multicultural competence of doctoral students in the field of counseling. For example, a counselor’s multicultural competency can be enhanced by applying knowledge obtained from study abroad programs. In our study, all six participants discussed how they planned to implement the knowledge they learned from their experiences into practice with regard to their respective fields of counseling. In particular, Marie orchestrated a plan in order to impact the lives of her students: “Actually, a goal for this school year is to provide guidance lessons geared towards English as second language students, implement a support group for parents, and most importantly instead of making assumptions really stepping back and getting feedback.” In speaking of her own self as a counselor, Lisa stated:

I always try to demonstrate empathy and sensitivity, but that has definitely risen to another level, when you are the newcomer, you are the outsider coming in and so that experience sometimes can be very intimidating or overwhelming and so I will have a new look on my parents and my students with a different perspective, one with more sensitivity, more empathy, and trying to see how I can help them adjust.

Whereas Marie discussed plans to implement a support group at her school, Katie, Sharon, Ruth, and Ann focused on the importance of the family system within counseling. As Katie stated, “It has shown me that when working with kids, I should especially focus more on the family, help parents understand why their kids are coming, and help them see that it’s not just about the kids, it’s important to include them.” In gaining a realization for working with Hispanic clients; Sharon shared her thoughts:

I realized that if I counsel individuals from this culture, I need to be sure to include family values. I also need to be cognizant of imposing my American values of being independent and self-reliant on the clients. Most importantly however, I will try to learn as much about the client as possible and not assume that just because I visited Mexico for one week that I know all about the culture.

Ruth continued by explaining how she acquired new confidence when working with Hispanic clients:

I actually saw how some people can live and interact in everyday life. I heard the professionals say that they are not readily acceptable to mental health services, but that is beginning to become more acceptable because they start with working with the children and that just confirms what I have seen with my experiences of Hispanic families. They really do a lot to improve the educational environment and mental health environment of their children. I think it gives me a little more confidence in working with Hispanic families.

Finally, Ann expressed how she felt the study abroad experience would affect her world of work: “I will think more globally and recognize and be cognizant of differences before I just assume something about somebody. So, I guess to be more cautious in my work with students.”

The participants in this study believe that the family is an integral part of Hispanic culture and its importance should be respected in the counseling setting.

**Services Abroad**

At the time of our study, all six participants were currently employed in a counseling related occupation. From their perspectives, they noted the differences and similarities between services and needs required by individuals born in the United States versus those born in Mexico. To illustrate, Marie was surprised by Mexico’s educational system:

I was able to see how the school system is so different than those in the United States. Children are not required to attend public school. Those students that do attend school are probably from well-to-do families or middle class.

Further, Ann spoke about the disparity in the educational system and her knowledge of services abroad:

The fact there is very little middle class, students can either go to a private school, a really good public school, or a regular public school, but there are vast differences between the qualities of education. I had a pretty vast experience with the Hispanic culture before, but I was surprised at the level of services they have.
In addition, Katie explained her perceptions: “There are differences in what is normal for mental health, how it is treated, how it’s viewed in the Hispanic culture.”

When asked about the services and needs of the population in Puebla, Mexico, Sharon shared her thoughts regarding the study abroad course and her new perspective concerning mental health services:

Participating in the international study abroad program definitely gave me a new perspective on how other countries do counseling. I was under the impression that our mental health program was completely different. While there were some differences (educational requirements, lack of professional organizations) many of our techniques are similar. I was pleasantly surprised with the amount of available resources in Mexico. Many times the media portrays Mexico as this country that is devoid of even the basic necessities.

In addition, Lisa described how the knowledge of services she gained would assist her in working with Hispanic clients:

Many times I see clients who haven’t been in the U.S. very long. Having visited their country and seeing the services that we have in the U.S. that they don’t necessarily have access to in Mexico; I might see how I may offer them social services or give them resources of where they can find those services.

Ruth shared similar sentiments by stating,

... visiting the counseling centers and realizing that they are servicing some of the same needs that we have ... now I will possibly ask them about their experiences; “have you ever accessed services in your country of origin and if so what types of services” and see if I can find some familiarity to start from.

Impact of Experiential Learning

Participants expressed how the experiential learning component involving activities impacted their experiences. Katie, for example, felt that the activities enhanced her cultural awareness: “The activities fostered a greater cultural awareness and allowed me to break some of the stereotypes, giving me more sensitivity and openness towards individuals who come into a country that is very different.” For Sharon, the experiential activities provided her with insight into multiculturalism:

I was able to understand through firsthand experience how important it is to be a multicultural competent counselor. I also see the importance of being open minded and making a concerted effort not to stereotype and to try not to generalize across races or cultures.

Due to the study abroad experiences, Ann believed that she gained an enhanced outlook through experiential learning: “It has made me broaden my perspective when things are discussed not only think about how what we are learning will apply here, I now think about how it would apply in another culture, thinking more globally.”

Marie further shared her perceptions regarding the impact that the study abroad program experiences had on her: “Well I think it brought me to the realization that it is very important to be culturally diverse and the importance of being culturally aware of different cultures as a school counselor, taking all factors into consideration.”

Both Ruth and Lisa spoke at length regarding the difference between hands-on instructions versus textbook highlights. Ruth began by explaining, “The international abroad class provided us with hands on experience so that we weren't just reading about different people in Mexico and the services they receive, but we were actually able to go there and experience it firsthand.” Lisa continued:

*Well I think overall it has broadened my experience, in that as opposed to reading about cultures and reading about multiculturalism that we often do in the counseling program, to go to that environment and actually experience, brings the learning to a whole different level.*

Overall, the participants valued the experiential learning component of the study abroad course as well as the opportunity to observe and interact firsthand with a different culture. Briefly, they tended to be genuinely grateful for the opportunity, and they conveyed the importance of understanding cultural awareness and cultural competence. Although the students were exposed to various sources regarding diversity and multiculturalism, literature alone may not be enough to influence cultural sensitivity while rejecting the idea of multiculturalism (Steward et al., 1998). By listening to the students' shared experiences, the importance gained from their experiences through participation in study abroad courses was expressed and the need for more counselors and counselor educators to experience study abroad experiences was clearly articulated.

**Discussion and Implications**

From the information collected in our study, we concur with Kitsantas’ (2004) position that study abroad, cultural immersion, and experiential learning enhances multicultural awareness of students who participate in international study abroad programs. According to Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005), these students utilize their study abroad experiences to question their assumptions as well as their stereotypical images of other cultures and to implement the information into their chosen profession. The results of our study are consistent with those of previous studies (Canfield et al., 2009; Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Dickson et al., 2008; Kitsantas, 2004) pertaining to the importance of cultural learning experiences and the development of healthy professionals.

Participants in our study shared their changed professional perceptions regarding culture and the importance of multicultural competencies in the helping profession. In
addition, they voiced their opinions regarding their cultural experiences and found their study abroad experiences to be valuable and immeasurable in comparison to traditional classroom assignments and activities regarding cultural competency. In our study results, great emphasis was placed on the importance of experiential learning — a major component of enhancing cultural awareness and appreciation for students in the helping profession.

In addition, our results are in accordance with current literature (Fairchild et al., 2006; Marx & Moss, 2011; McLeod & Wainwright, 2009; Mehta, 2011) given that study abroad programs have been proven to effectively motivate adult learners into formulating new perspectives and attitudes pertaining to multiculturalism. In our study, for example, the study abroad program assisted adult learners in attaining new insights and a fresh perspective on how to connect with and respect clients and colleagues from other cultures. Thus, the need for culturally competent counselors and counselor educators must remain a priority in order for the profession to provide effective services to culturally diverse populations. In order to provide effective services, informing counselors and counselor educators about cultural and multicultural competences can also help to further increase their knowledge pertaining to diverse cultures.

Conclusions and Recommendations

According to Sue and Sue (2003), cultural competence among counselors is gained through his or her awareness, knowledge, and skills. In short, a culturally competent counselor must become aware of his or her own assumptions, values, and biases; accept the worldview of others in a nonjudgmental manner; and determine and utilize appropriate intervention strategies when working with diverse populations. Essentially, training institutions must become the springboard in which counselors are propelled into the world of cultural competency that allows them to face a diverse society. The need for cultural and diversity among counselor educators is also expressed in the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards (2009). In a multicultural society, for example, studies should provide an understanding of the cultural context of relationships, issues, and trends. In addition, Section F.11.c of the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2005) delineates that counselor educators should actively infuse multicultural/diversity competency in their training and supervision practices. Due to the ACA Code of Ethics and the CACREP Standards that distinctly instruct professors to create opportunities for students to gain diverse experiences in becoming culturally competent, we believe that study abroad courses within counselor educator programs will further advance these directives.

In our phenomenological study, we provided insight pertaining to doctoral students' cultural experiences in a study abroad counselor education course. As a result, we found a lack of literature regarding study abroad programs in the area of mental health professions as well the impact of cultural exposure on cultural competence. The scarcity of literature provides sufficient reason for encouraging research pertaining to experiential learning and cultural immersion. Hence, counselor educators should explore the idea of creating a

cultural immersion or study abroad experience designed specifically for counseling education programs. By doing so, the need for advanced level counseling students and future counselor educators can be addressed in order to gain cultural awareness experiences that will, in turn, broaden their cultural viewpoints (CACREP, 2009, Section 2.2.f). As mentioned, research regarding cultural immersion and study abroad programs as they relate to counseling and counselor education is scarce. Therefore, it is recommended that our study be replicated with a group of participants from several universities because one of the limitations of our study is that all participants were from the same university. We also recommend that future studies include a mixed methods approach and quantitative approach to enhance the qualitative literature that exists. Lastly, conducting a longitudinal study with students who participate in study abroad programs may provide an indication of the long term impact on their professionalism and multicultural competencies over time. In conclusion, there is an apparent need for cultural immersion and exposure to diverse activities and populations that will facilitate in cultivating culturally competent counselors.

References


