

Cultural Immersion in Counselor Education in the United States: A Quasi Experimental Study

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Researchers (e.g., Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Kim & Lyons, 2003; Rundstrom, 2005) examining the development of multicultural counseling competence have argued that contact and exposure with people from diverse backgrounds through cultural immersion develops higher degrees of cultural empathy, increased awareness, self-efficacy and competence when compared to primarily didactic instruction. The purpose of this study was to employ a quasi-experimental design to investigate the differences between counselor education students who participated in a cultural immersion experience (n = 19) and counselor education students who did not immerse (n = 18). Results and implications for future research are discussed.

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Developing multicultural competence has been the focus of research and scholarship for the past few decades (Glosoff & Durham, 2010), however there is a relative paucity of literature on empirically based pedagogical methods that are effective in teaching counselor trainees how to be culturally competent (Barden & Cashwell, 2014). Traditional pedagogical methods in the counseling profession have originated from a European-Western perspective; operating primarily within monocultural and monolingual frameworks are relatively ineffective when working with people from diverse, pluralistic backgrounds (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). In fact, counseling trainees and graduates have frequently reported a lack of preparedness in working with diverse clients (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Constantine, 2001; D'Andrea & Daniels, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers,

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1999), presumably from the insufficient or inappropriate pedagogy that fails to foster multicultural self-efficacy (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005).

According to Collins and Pieterse (2007), training must include a new level of infusion, “pushing beyond the classroom walls” (p. 17) and directly applying multicultural considerations to trainees’ daily lives, highlighting the need to bridge classroom knowledge and real world settings. By engaging students through blending theories and practice in real world settings beyond the classroom, the likelihood of creating lasting learning outcomes may be increased (Arredondo & Toporek, 2004; Coleman, 2006; Collins & Pieterse, 2007; Kim & Lyons, 2003; Pompa, 2002). Experiential education has been supported in effectively connecting multicultural theory to practice, offering an avenue for students to challenge personal beliefs and behavior patterns, in both cognitive and affective domains (Chung & Bemack, 2002), progressing from ethnocentric to ethnorelative perspectives (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Coleman, 2006; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Kim & Lyons, 2003). Moreover, there is general recognition by counselor educators of the utility of experiential learning in diversity training to raise awareness, challenge personal schemas, and provide opportunities to access deeply embedded biases (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Coleman, 2006; Kim & Lyons, 2003; Pedersen, 2000; Tomlinson-Clarke, & Clarke, 2010). To construct new schemas or knowledge, individuals must encounter situations that challenge their existing paradigms, or encounter ‘disorienting dilemmas’ in which they are forced to reexamine their existing perspectives (Mezirow, 1990). One way for counselors to challenge their existing worldviews and assumptions and to develop cultural sensitivity is through engaging in cultural immersion (Canfield, Low, & Hovestadt, 2009; Pope-Davis & Coleman, 1997).

Researchers have suggested that students typically gravitate towards the cognitive aspects of diversity and neglect the affective responses to dealing with unfamiliar environments, limiting their ability to empathize with diverse clients (Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009). Therefore, it is imperative to provide experiences in which students directly engage in a learning process where they examine, expand and question their cultural assumptions, acquiring affective, behavioral, and cognitive shifts that foster new levels of awareness (Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009; Weaver, 2005). Although most counselor education programs discuss the importance of diversity in helping professions, few programs provide opportunities for students to have direct in-vivo contact with people from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, the purpose of this manuscript is to highlight findings from a quasi-experimental study exploring differences in multicultural self-efficacy and multicultural counseling competence between counselor trainees who participated in an international immersion experience and counselor trainees who did not participate.

Cultural Immersion

Cultural immersion is defined as “direct, prolonged, *in vivo* contact with a culture different from that of the counselor trainee” (Pope-Davis & Coleman, 1997, p. 232), which requires stepping out of one’s own culture and comfort zone as opposed to importing cultural elements into one’s own sphere of familiarity (Canfield et al., 2009). This is one example of facilitating an environment in which students may encounter a disorienting

dilemma as participants may be placed in situations that do not align with their existing cultural schemas. Cultural immersion programs can provide participants with the experience of being 'other,' illustrating the struggles for minority clients and highlighting the influences of culture on behavior and the need for helping professionals to be culturally sensitive. Immersion experiences are intended to enhance the understanding of course content while moving beyond the narrow scope of knowledge acquisition: by involving students in ways that allow them to gain a greater breadth and depth of experience through experiential involvement and immersion in the social, political, cultural and environmental realities of their communities, and by providing a critical experience for counselor trainees that cannot be achieved solely by didactic instruction (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Shannonhouse & West-Olatunji, 2013).

Several researchers examining the development of multicultural counseling competence have argued that contact and exposure with people from diverse backgrounds develops higher degrees of cultural empathy, increased awareness, self-efficacy and competence when compared to primarily didactic instruction (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Barden & Cashwell, 2014; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001; Kim & Lyons, 2003; Rundstrom, 2005). Immersion experiences enable participants to have direct involvement with people from diverse backgrounds, engaging in cross cultural learning that increases participants' skills, self-efficacy and ability to critically think and conceptualize the cultural contexts of others. Through engaging in cultural immersion, learners can challenge their existing worldviews and assumptions, progressing along the continuum of multicultural competence as they interact with persons from diverse backgrounds (Canfield et al., 2009; Pope-Davis & Coleman, 1997).

In a 2013 study, Barden and Cashwell employed consensual qualitative research methodology to examine the phenomenon of international immersion on counselor education students' ($N = 10$) development and growth. Results indicated that participants attributed their international immersion experience to increases in empathy, self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, and expanding worldviews. Specifically, results suggested when participants were out of their comfort zone they experienced some form of cognitive and cultural dissonance, which contributed to shifting their worldviews and cultural schemas (Barden & Cashwell, 2014).

Another example of the influence of immersion experiences is highlighted by a study investigating the impact of an immersion experience for social work students who participated in an international immersion experience in Scotland (Lindsey, 2005). Enhanced self-awareness seemed to be a central theme for all participants, with participants stating that the most significant learning that occurred was learning about themselves. One student wrote "I have a new sense of clarity now, about myself, my needs and about other people as well. I feel stronger and more confident than I ever have in my life," highlighting changes in self-awareness and self-efficacy (Lindsey, 2005, p. 237). Cordero and Rodriguez (2009) investigated the impact of a 12-day international immersion experience for social work graduate students in Puerto Rico. Results from qualitative journals indicated that participants reported increased self-awareness, cross cultural knowledge, and commitment to social justice. Student reflections illustrated critical reflection on their attitudes and abilities about working with people from diverse

backgrounds. One student stated, “the trip has helped me understand how to be more effective when working with Puerto Ricans in the U.S. It’s important for me to keep in mind the effect of devaluing Latino values” (p. 144). Furthermore, Cordero and Rodriguez (2009) stated that the transformative learning process of international immersion moved students beyond a desire to serve ethnic minorities, rather the immersion deepened the students’ commitments to social action; stating that after returning home from the immersion participants developed an educational video about human rights, participated in lobbying efforts and have continued to work in community settings that advocate for the rights of Latinos/as. Similarly, Tomlinson-Clarke and Clarke (2010) stated that a majority of participants from counseling, psychology, and education disciplines reported increases in cultural competence as a result of their participation in an immersion experience to South Africa.

In sum, literature on international immersion experiences clearly highlights the potential changes in interpersonal and intrapersonal development for participants across helping professions. Despite evidence suggesting positive shifts for participants, further research is needed to more specifically evaluate the effectiveness of international immersion on counselor development. Furthermore, although both domestic and international immersion experiences have been accepted as effective pedagogical tools in counseling, differences between how immersed students change relative to their non-immersed peers has not been explored, particularly for counseling graduate students (Majewski & Turner, 2007; Pedersen, 2009). Additionally, the vast majority of empirical research has been qualitative thus far. To this end, the current study sought to provide the first empirical quasi-experimental study exploring quantitative differences in multicultural self-efficacy and multicultural counseling competence between counselor trainees who participated in an international immersion experience compared to counselor trainees who did not. In order to contribute to the counselor education and development literature, we examined the following research question: Do significant differences in multicultural competence and multicultural self efficacy exist between counselor education students participating in cultural immersion compared to non-participant students?

Methods

Participants

The current study included two experimental groups and two comparison groups of counselor trainees in a CACREP-accredited full-time counselor preparation program at a mid-sized University in the Southeast. Participants in experimental groups participated in a three-week, six credit hour cultural immersion courses in Costa Rica, one in the summer of 2011 and another group in the summer of 2012. Conversely, participants in the comparison groups were made up of counselor education students who did not participate in the immersion. A total of 19 participants contributed data from the experimental group (Male, $n = 3$; Female $n = 16$). Eighty-four percent ($n = 16$) of the participants identified as Caucasian, 10.5% ($n = 2$) as Asian American, and 5.2% ($n = 1$) as Latino/Latina. Participants were doctoral students ($n = 3$) and master’s students ($n = 16$), with average ages ranging

from 23 to 32 years old ($M = 26.0$). Similarly, a total of 18 participations contributed data to the comparison groups (Male, $n = 4$; Female, $n = 14$). Seventy-two percent ($n = 16$) of the participants identified as Caucasian and 9.1 % ($n = 2$) identified as Black/African American. Participants were master's students ($n = 15$) and doctoral students ($n = 3$), with average ages ranging from 23 to 45 years old ($M = 26.6$).

The comparison groups continued to engage in coursework and counseling related activities such as courses, practicum and internship as usual. Course material and clinical experiences for comparison groups varied due to participants being in different developmental stages of their training (i.e., master's and doctoral students). The experimental groups were prepared for the immersion by holding monthly class meetings the semester prior to departure, discussing assigned readings and receiving didactic information about the host country, such as the history, educational system, and cultural norms. Additionally, participants paired in small groups gave presentations to the group on the sociopolitical climate of host country, perspectives on domestic violence and substance abuse, and stigma and cultural barriers for engaging in mental health services. During the immersion experiences, students lived with Costa Rican host families in a small suburban, middle class area for three weeks. A counselor education faculty member and two doctoral teaching assistants with previous cultural immersion experience facilitated the immersion experiences. Through the experience, students engaged in cultural immersion tours, educational presentations, service work and reflective processing. Cultural immersion tours included visits to historic, cultural, and governmental sites where students learned more about current economic and political issues of Costa Rica and Central America. Through collaboration with a humanitarian foundation, participants interacted with persons in an immigrant community and engaged refugee survivors in creative activities such as drawing and storytelling related to their hopes for the future; students also assisted in building bunk beds and clearing rubble enabling the community to build a paved road.

In addition to cultural and service learning, students participated in large group processing where they shared their experiences for the day and discussed how the immersion experience was impacting them or challenging them. Students were instructed to set aside time daily to reflect on their experiences and write in their journal. Through both the group discussions and journaling, students were asked to link course content with their previous experiences and vice versa, evaluate their strengths and needs as a professional counselor, and deepen their understanding of the ethical and clinical implications of working with diverse populations both domestically and internationally.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to investigate the impact of the immersion experience for experimental and comparison groups. The Multicultural Counseling Self-Efficacy Scale – Racial Diversity Form (MCSES, Sheu & Lent, 2007) and the Multicultural Counseling Competence and Training Survey – Revised (MCCTS-R, Holcomb-McCoy & Day-Vines, 2004) were used to measure multicultural self-efficacy and multicultural counseling competency, respectively.

Multicultural Counseling Self-Efficacy Scale – Racial Diversity Form

The MCSES-RD is a self-report measure developed to measure one's perceived ability to counsel racially diverse clients (Sheu & Lent, 2007). The MCSE-RD was initially developed with 60 items, which were subject to principal axis factoring with both orthogonal and oblique rotations, yielding a 37-item three-factor structure. The three factors included multicultural intervention ($n = 24$), multicultural assessment ($n = 6$), and multicultural session management ($n = 7$) with internal consistencies ranging from .92 to .98 (Sheu & Lent, 2007). The total score yielded an α of .98 based on three samples: (a) 181 graduate students that were either taking a counseling practicum courses or at later stages of counselor training, (b) 41 undergraduate students enrolled in helping skills course, and (c) 22 graduate students enrolled in second semester of a year-long masters practicum course (Sheu & Lent, 2007). The instrument is scored by taking average of subscale and total scores.

Discriminant validity of the MCSE-RD scores was supported by small, non-significant correlations with social desirability. In regards to convergent validity, MCSE-RD scores were found to correlate positively and significantly with both general counseling self-efficacy (CASES scores) and multicultural competence (MCI scores). Specifically, the multicultural intervention subscale ($r = .71, .73, \text{ and } .72$) and the multicultural session management subscale ($r = .72, .79, \text{ and } .71$) correlated with the helping skills, session management, and counseling challenging scales of the CASES, and multicultural assessment subscale to a lesser degree ($r = .55, .55, \text{ and } .58$). Further all MCSE-RD scores correlated strongly with CASES scores. In addition, the MCSE-RD scores correlated with the multicultural skills subscale of MCI ($r = .58$) over multicultural awareness ($r = .50$), knowledge ($r = .55$), or relationship ($r = .37$).

Multicultural Counseling Competence and Training Survey – Revised

The MCCTS-R was developed to measure the multicultural competence of professional counselors based on the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development's (AMCD) Multicultural Competencies (Holcomb-McCoy & Day-Vines, 2004). The MCCTS-R is a 61-item self-report instrument using a Likert scale responses (4 = extremely competent to 1 = not competent). Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999) performed a principal components factor analysis with oblique rotation on the MCCTS that initially indicated five factors accounting for 63% of the variance of the competence items: knowledge of multicultural issues ($\alpha = .92$), awareness ($\alpha = .92$), definitions of terms ($\alpha = .79$), racial identity development ($\alpha = .66$), and multicultural skills ($\alpha = .91$). These results are based on a sample of 151 professional counselors solicited from ACA membership. The sample had a much larger (30%) number of minorities than the population (7%), due to self-selection and intentional solicitation from AMCD (an ACA division with 49% minority membership). In 2004, Holcomb-McCoy and Day-Vines conducted an exploratory factor analysis with 209 practicing school counselors. Results indicated a three-factor structure: terminology ($\alpha = .97$), knowledge ($\alpha = .95$), and awareness ($\alpha = .85$), which is the current factor structure of the MCCTS-R. The instrument

is scored by averaging the items per factor; with higher scores denoting higher perceived multicultural counseling competence.

Procedure

This study used a quasi-experimental design using an experimental and comparison group of students at varying stages and level of study in counselor education, with the cultural immersion course considered the intervention or independent variable. Recruitment for the study was initiated with students who attended a departmental interest meeting. Students were asked to include their name on the mailing list if they were willing to be contacted for this study once the participants of the immersion were finalized the following semester. At that time, all students who registered for the course were invited to participate, with only one student declining. The remaining students who attended the interest meeting, but did not register for the course (either due to disinterest or inability) were invited to participate in the study and served as the comparison group. Data collection for both groups occurred at similar time points; four months prior to the departure for the cultural immersion course and six months after the students returned home from the immersion. Data was collected during the semester prior to the immersion in an effort to capture accurate baseline data for both groups given that the experimental groups attended semester long training prior to immersion. Post-test data was collected at the end of the Fall semester during a debriefing session for both groups in order to maximize the potential for participants to complete assessments. All instruments were administered in paper pencil format on the University campus.

Data Analysis

For the a priori hypothesis, a pretest-posttest, experimental-comparison group design was utilized to gather data on the MCSES and MCCTS. To test the specific a priori planned hypothesis (to determine multicultural self-efficacy and competence of each of the two groups) a within-group paired sample t-test analysis of pretest to posttest was conducted for each of the groups. To determine overall group differences, a between group ANCOVA was conducted to compare group differences after controlling for the effects of pretesting. To further understand the effects of the cultural immersion intervention, a repeated measures ANOVA was performed on subscale scores to determine those scores with statistically significant scores. Partial eta squared effect sizes were calculated in order to determine the strength of the relationship between treatment and outcome for practical significance.

Results

Preliminary analyses using *t*-tests revealed that there were no differences in the pre-test mean scores between the experimental (Group 1) or comparison group (Group 2) on either the MCSES or the MCCTS or on any of the subscales at observation one (see Table 1 for *t*-test results). Since the two groups were considered statistically equivalent at the

first observation, an ANCOVA was conducted on the posttest scores for the total score on each instrument using the pretest scores as the covariate. The posttest scores for the MCSES of the two groups were significantly different ($F(1,34) = 5.96, p = .031, \eta^2 = .141$) accounting for 14% of the variance (See Table 2). The posttest scores for the MCCTS were significantly different ($F(1,34) = 17.054, p = .000, \eta^2 = .355$); however, Levene's test for equality of error variances was significant ($F = 7.106, p = .012$) indicating that the assumption of equal variances was violated for this analysis (see Table 2). Therefore, the total and subscale scores for the MCSES were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA only to identify significant differences, while accounting for covariance between pairs and minimizing type I and II errors. Three repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted concurrently between (a) times, (b) groups, and (c) interaction between those two variables, interaction variable, representing degree of change in scores from observation one to observation two between the groups (see Table 3).

Table 1.

T-tests on pre-test scores for experimental and comparison groups.

	Experimental	Comparison	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>		
MCSES	5.16 (1.24)	5.46 (1.17)	-.789	39
MCCTS	2.69 (.34)	2.79 (.25)	-1.098	37

Note: No significant differences at $p \leq .05$, Standard Deviations appear in parentheses beside means.

Table 2.

Results of ANCOVA of students' total mean scores of Multicultural Counseling Self-efficacy Scale (MCSES) and Multicultural Competence (MCCTS) between experimental and comparison groups.

Variable	Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Adjusted Mean	Adjusted <i>SE</i>	Levene's	<i>F</i>	Partial Eta Squared
							Test of Equality of Error Variances		
Self-efficacy	Exp	16	6.54	.85	6.60	.196	.08	5.09*	.141
	Com	18	6.04	.91	5.99	.184			
Competence	Exp	16	3.07	.31	3.10	.05	7.11*	17.05**	.355
	Com	18	2.81	.13	2.76	.05			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Table 3.

Results of repeated measures ANOVA for the MCSES full scale and subscales.

MCSES Total				
Effect	<i>MS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Time	16.66	1	24.893	.00*
Time x Group	2.91	1	4.35	.05**
Error	.67	32		
<i>Multicultural Intervention Subscale</i>				
Effect	<i>MS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Time	30.99	1	41.10	.00*
Time x Group	2.82	1	3.74	.06
Error	1.428	32		
<i>Multicultural Awareness Subscale</i>				
Effect	<i>MS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Time	20.50	1	14.35	.00*
Time x Group	6.48	1	4.54	.04**
Error	1.43	32		
<i>Multicultural Session Management Subscale</i>				
Effect	<i>MS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Time	7.64	1	14.41	.00*
Time x Group	2.03	1	3.83	.06
Error	0.05	32		

* $p < .001$. ** $p < .05$

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Repeated measures ANOVA on the MCSES subscale scores revealed significant differences for the mean scores between groups at observation two for the subscale Multicultural Assessment scale only (MA; $F = 4.54$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2 = .120$). The eta-squared statistic is equivalent to effect size for repeated measures ANOVAs and describes the ratio of variance explained in the dependent variable by a predictor while controlling for other predictors. According to Cohen (1988), effect sizes are considered small at 0.0099, medium at 0.0588 and large at 0.1379 or above. The eta-squared for the significant variables MCSES Total and Multicultural Assessment scale scores were medium at .120 each, providing support that the group membership is contributing to the differences between groups.

Discussion

Results from this investigation contribute to existing research supporting cultural immersion. Specifically, this study provided the first empirical research study investigating the influence of cultural immersion between counselor trainees who immersed compared to trainees that did not immerse. Results suggested that there were significant differences in multicultural counseling self-efficacy with medium effect sizes for students who participated in the immersion experience when compared to the students who did not participate after accounting for the effects of pretesting.

Cultural immersion may provide greater increases in overall multicultural self-efficacy as measured by the MCSES than conventional pedagogic and clinical training. Confidence in the trainees' ability to engage with culturally different populations and conduct culturally competent multicultural assessment (as measured by MA) suggests that cultural immersion experiences enhance attainment of efficacy and skills more thoroughly than clinical experiences and training alone. Overall, results from this study suggest that cultural immersion experiences may be sufficient in increasing counseling skills and the self-efficacy needed for counseling students to more appropriately assess cultural differences. It is reasonable to conclude from this empirical support that the disorienting dilemmas experienced by the counseling students by immersing and increasing interactions with a different culture are superior to traditional didactic alone in increasing multicultural assessment and self-efficacy. Counselor educators may consider how to incorporate cultural immersion experiences that are sufficient enough in time and location to facilitate disorienting dilemmas that appear to be essential for developing culturally competent counselors.

On the other hand, there were no significant differences between groups for the construct of multicultural competence after controlling for pretest effects as a covariate. The nature of the cultural immersion afforded participants minimal to no actual counseling practice, which may explain the lack of significant difference in this area. These results may also highlight the potential difficulties in not only measuring competence, but also potential challenges of increasing competence in relatively short periods of time. Roysircar (2006) stated that as trainees become more multiculturally competent and aware of the complexities of diversity such as oppression, privilege and racism, they tend to score themselves as less competent on assessments. Therefore, same or lower self-reported scores of cultural competence may actually illustrate increased competence. Results also

suggest the difficulty of translating clinical experiences from one context to another. Specifically, trainees may have felt more self-efficacious and more competent when immersed and working with the specific population in Costa Rica, however were not able to generalize that experience when taking assessment six months later after returning home to their home country.

In sum, rapidly changing demographic shifts in the United States highlight the need for counselors to be well prepared in working with clients from diverse backgrounds (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). Researchers (e. g., Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Coleman, 2006; Kim & Lyons, 2003) emphasize that experiential pedagogical approaches such as cultural immersion enhance the effectiveness of multicultural counselor training beyond traditional approaches. The current study provides further support for immersion experiences for counselor trainees.

Implications for Counselors and Counselor Educators

Findings from this study have several implications for counselors and counselor educators. Researchers (e.g., Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; D'Andrea & Daniels, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999) indicate that counseling graduates feel ineffective and unprepared to work with clients from culturally diverse backgrounds due to insufficient training and preparation. Additionally, Larson & Daniels (1998) conducted a meta-analysis on counselor self-efficacy, indicating that higher self-efficacy was related to perseverance in the face of challenging counselor tasks. Results from this study support the influence of cultural immersion on counselor trainee multicultural self efficacy. One explanation immersion experiences may be more effective than traditional didactic approaches in multicultural courses is supported by the notions that experiencing cultural dissonance is an essential experience for increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity. Given that the focus of immersion experiences is to provide opportunities to interact with culturally diverse persons, these experiences tend to provide opportunities to increase cultural sensitivity and awareness, and also expand worldviews as students become aware of their previously unrecognized values and beliefs. However, not all students are able to participate in international experiences based on cost, timing, etc.

Counselor educators may consider developing instructional strategies that replicate the experiences of being immersed in cultures where students experience cultural norms that are different from their own and have the experiences of being 'other', providing opportunities for students to experience cultural dissonance. For example, counselor educators may include experiential components to multicultural courses wherein students are required to immerse in local communities different from the one they grew up in. According to Tomlinson-Clarke and Clarke (2010), providing students with a variety of learning experiences that expose participants to the richness of the culture, including language, traditions, and cultural nuances, is essential when conducting an immersion. Similarly, Barden and Cashwell's (2013) results indicated the most positive critical incident experiences of the immersion was engaging in counseling related interactions (i.e., group counseling, working in schools, art therapy at domestic violence shelter) with community members. Whether developing local, national or international immersion experiences,

counselor educators are encouraged to consider maximizing direct interactions between community members and students.

In sum, researchers (e.g., Alexander et al., 2005; Burnett et al., 2004; Canfield et al., 2009; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010) consistently have found positive benefits of immersion experiences in developing helping professionals, primarily evaluating the influence on students who immersed. Results from this current study fill a gap in the literature and provide support for differences between students who immersed compared to their peers that did not immerse. While this study continues to support the efficacy of cultural immersion, more research is needed to evaluate both short and long-term outcomes, coupled with critical factors that lead to change among participants including greater empathy for cultural differences, increased self-awareness of one's own biases and assumptions, and increased self-efficacy for working with clients from diverse backgrounds (Tomlinson-Clarke, 1999).

Limitations and Future Research

The sample consisted of relatively small groups and was limited in diversity as participants predominately identified as White females sampled from one university. Random assignment to groups was not possible due to the nature of the intervention. Due to the voluntary nature of the research participation, participants in the experimental group may have had different characteristics from those who did not participate, which may confound the results. Furthermore, given that all participants were volunteers and were responding to issues such as cultural sensitivity, the potential for social desirability may also be a limitation in this study. Finally, given that the design of the study was quasi-experimental and assessments were administered over 10-month span, maturation of participants may have occurred. Differences between the first and second courses and familiarity with instruments are potential limitations of the study as well. Although all research has limitations, several implications for counselors and future research exist as a result of this study.

Further research is warranted to investigate how immersion experiences may foster development from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages of competence. Furthermore, there is a need to elucidate the training methods that contribute to the development of increased competency and self-efficacy for counseling trainees. This is particularly important if educators are to foster development of the person as the counselor and cultivate skills that are requisite in order to effectively build relationships with clients from all backgrounds (Collins & Arthur, 2010; Reupert, 2006; Strupp & Anderson, 1997). Results from this study provide support for international immersion experiences positively impacting counselor-trainee's development. Given that the majority of research investigating multicultural competence relies on self-report measures, future research that utilizes behavioral observations or other more objective measures would greatly contribute to existing empirical research. Future research is needed to both replicate and extend these findings, specifically including larger sample sizes and conducting experimental repeated measure design studies to elucidate how time and group processing may enable trainees to experience and effectively process disorienting dilemmas while immersed. Lastly, future

research is needed to investigate how to best generalize cultural immersion experiences to clinical performance with clients.

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