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Building Multicultural Awareness of Self and Others Through A Group Discussion Experience

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Building Multicultural Awareness of Self and Others Through

A Group Discussion Experience

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I would like to thank my wife Therese for being my steadfast and devoted partner in getting through this difficult and complex time of coping with loss, raising children, finishing our degrees, and maintaining a household. As well, I would like to thank three mentors in particular: Jeff Cochran, Jeremiah Donigian, and Muhyi Shakoor. All of these men have played a crucial role in my development as a counselor, as well as a man. I can not thank them enough for their teaching and example, and hope to attain their level of subtlety, nuance, and skill.

Abstract

The importance of teaching and learning about multicultural issues was explored. The author contends that along with the increasing need for multicultural awareness, there is an increasing need for experiential exercises to effectively gain this awareness. The literature was reviewed and shown to support the necessity for both of these important issues. The growing need for counselor training programs to incorporate experiential teaching methods as well as the traditional teaching methods was also explored. Potential risks to clients whose counselors are not multiculturally aware were elaborated upon. The limitations of traditional teaching methods for multicultural learning were discussed. The importance of combining traditional methods with experiential learning was explored. In particular, using a group format as a method for enhancing understanding and awareness was discussed. A study was run to measure the effectiveness of a group discussion experience on increasing the multicultural awareness of MBA students with a concentration in international business. Results were shown to support the effectiveness of the group format. Strengths, limitation, and recommendations for future research were also elaborated upon.

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Building Multicultural Awareness of Self and Others

Through A Group Discussion Experience

Review of Literature

The Importance of Multicultural Learning and Competence in Today's Global Society/Community

American society is more diverse ethnically, racially, linguistically, and culturally today than at any other time in its history, and promises to be even more so in the future (Bemak, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Lee & Richardson, 1991; Slattery, 2004). In this increasingly diverse society, the need for having awareness and understanding of multicultural issues has also greatly increased. It is important to work toward better understanding of others culturally if one is to create solid, lasting relationships within one's circles of interaction and larger community (Banks et al., 2001; Grillo, 2005). Yet, many people who are not familiar with cultural diversity find themselves in a place of discomfort when confronted with issues involving race, ethnicity, gender, religion, etc. Unfortunately, this discomfort often encourages avoidance of multicultural issues rather than action to address them directly (Grillo; Tromski & Doston, 2003). In recent years the counseling, psychology, and education fields, as well as others, have done more research in this area (Hansen & Williams, 2003). Yet, even with this significant increase in diversity, counselors, psychologists, and educators have remained mainly Euro-American and middle class (Bemak; Hansen & Williams; Slattery) and therefore somewhat separated from some of their clients and students (Banks et al.; Slattery). As a result, there are building concerns that people of different cultures, and/or classes, are not getting equivalent services. Even more troubling, is the idea that many of those who are culturally different from white, middle

class, Euro-Americans, are being misdiagnosed or pressured to conform to mainstream cultural norms (Hansen & Williams; Lee & Richardson; Slattery). Multicultural issues can be even more important in regard to group work. A lack of awareness of these issues can be a serious impediment to the process and outcome of group work, as well as a potentially hurtful and damaging experience for individual participants (Bemak; Delucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004; Greely, 1992). In light of these concerns, there is a great need for counselors and educators to be able to work with others who differ culturally in competent, sensitive, and effective ways. Professionals in teaching and training programs are responding to this need with an increased effort and focus to bring these issues to their programs at a fundamental level (Bemak, 2005; Constantine & Gainor, 2002; Hansen & Williams; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers; Lee & Richardson).

A person's cultural identity is not limited to race, nationality, or ethnicity. There are any number of cultural experiences that help characterize a person; his/her cultural identity may be effected by region, geography, family of origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, social class, health, age, ability/disability, and organizational/work culture (Banks et al, 2001; Slattery, 2004). Effective multicultural education and training promises an exploratory and meaningful look at issues regarding all of these varying aspects of cultural identity (Banks et al; Hyde & Ruth, 2002). While this can be a long and sometimes uncomfortable journey, it is necessary when learning to understand those who are different, and as well, it can be very rewarding (Slattery).

This increasing diversity in American society has important implications for the counseling process as well as the counselor/client relationship. If a counselor misses the role of fundamental cultural influences in his/her client, he/she may exacerbate the

client's self-blame while missing the opportunity for insight into effective coping strategies (Slattery, 2004). In addition, some clients who are feeling unheard or misunderstood may terminate prematurely (Lee & Richardson, 1991). While most counselors start out being open and respectful of others, for some it appears that a lack of understanding of their clients can be cause for a lessening of this level of respect and openness (Slattery). Unfortunately, a lack of respect and/or a close-minded attitude can help to foster a perception of counseling that many people of color already have; namely that counseling is a tool of oppression and social control (Lee & Richardson). In light of these issues, counselor educators are embracing the necessity for increased multicultural learning and training in order to prepare their students to become multiculturally competent counselors (Grillo, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999).

“Multicultural Competence” includes skills necessary to work productively with clients of differing cultural/ethnic experiences and backgrounds (Constantine & Gainor, 2002; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999). The literature has historically referred to multicultural competence as encompassing three ideals: First, attaining awareness of one's own worldview and how one's cultural/ethnic experiences have influences it; secondly, attaining knowledge and awareness of the differing worldviews and cultures of others; and thirdly, developing the skills necessary to work effectively and meaningfully with diverse clients (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers). The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) Professional Standards Committee has used these ideals to articulate a set of Multicultural Counseling Competencies that are intended to be the mainstay for training multiculturally competent counselors. In addition to AMCD, other credentialing bodies, such as the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and

Related Educational Programs (CACREP), have integrated multicultural competencies into their standards (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers). The creators of these standards have defined *Multicultural Counseling* as counseling involving those who differ with regard to race or ethnicity (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers). Lee and Richardson (1991) have broadly defined multicultural counseling to be characterized as theory and practice that places an equal emphasis on the cultural backgrounds of both client and counselor. However, when thinking and learning about multicultural issues, it is important to recognize that there is no set, universally recognized theory or definition of multicultural counseling (Delucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004).

In a recent study designed to assess professional counselors' perceptions of their multicultural competence (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999), results indicated that they perceived their training to be inadequate. Rather, they perceived their most meaningful and productive training in multicultural issues to have occurred in their early professional experience. This study suggests that it is important for counseling programs, as well as educational programs (Calero-Breckheimer, Costly, DasGupta, Guillen, & Meyer, 2006), to provide more abundant and effective multicultural training for their students while they are still in school (Bemak, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers). It is essential that this learning and training are at the heart of a course's objectives rather than being added on as a peripheral goal to an already existing course with a somewhat different focus (Greely, 1992; James & Sevig, 2001).

Achieving Multicultural Competence

When one embraces diversity, he/she is inherently embracing the differing experiences of others with the knowledge that these are no less valuable or important than

his/her own. This perspective dictates that one steps outside of his/her own cultural viewpoint in a spirit of openness, listening, and willingness to learn of another's experience and/or view (Grillo, 2005). In turn, honoring and accepting the diverse cultures of others encourages one to look within at his/her own experiences, beliefs, and attitudes in an effort to gain self-awareness of how these things shape his/her worldview and the way he/she interact with others. This requires recognition of the feelings of discomfort often associated with this learning, and a conscious choice to confront them in order to open the mind (Grillo). By making the effort to work through one's discomfort in order to look critically at the dominant culture's concepts, attitudes, beliefs, and norms, one is embracing diversity (Grillo). This attitude/perspective, which inherently makes us more genuine and empathic, is necessary for attaining multicultural competence (Doston & Tromski, 2003).

When multicultural competence is achieved, one will have the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively with people who culturally differ from themselves (Grillo; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999). Research has supported the effort to reach for multicultural competence in professional training and degree programs. In a study done to evaluate the impact of multicultural training on students in a counseling program, D'Andrea, Daniels, and Heck (1991) noticed that the promotion of student awareness, knowledge, and skill, had a significant positive effect on the project participants. In another study done to train pediatric residents in cultural competence, results showed that the residents learned to be more sensitive to cultural differences, more tolerant of those differences, and better able to recognize their own biases and how they

affected their care-giving (Calero-Breckheimer, Costly, DasGupta, Guillen, & Meyer, 2006).

Traditional Methods of Multicultural Instruction and Learning

There has been a historical tendency for various higher education and training programs to address multicultural issues in a more conceptual or academic/hypothetical way rather than in an experiential one (Grillo, 2005; Johnson, 1987). In this traditional method, multicultural learning has centered around lecture, text books on theory, and readings focused on learning about specific ethnic and racial communities (Hansen & Williams, 2003). Acquiring knowledge with respect to the various histories, perspectives, and belief systems of differing ethnic and cultural groups is an important and essential first step in learning about multicultural issues. This foundational learning helps one to have a sense of the context from which an individual comes; an abstract understanding of the social, political, economic, and religious influences and conditioning that help to shape an individual (Banks et al., 2001). Yet multicultural teaching and training falls far short of multicultural competence if this is not heavily supplemented with experiential activities in the classroom (Bemak, 2005; Greely, 1992; Delucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; James & Sevig, 2001; Johns & Sullivan, 2002; Doston & Tromski, 2003). Imber-Black (1997), and Tyler and Guth (1999), have strongly supported the need for multicultural training programs that engage in affective and experiential learning as well as the more traditional methods. Without an experiential component being included in multicultural awareness training, there is always a danger of intellectualizing what has been learned through more traditional methods (i.e., book-readings and lectures) (Anderson & Middleton, 2005). By

intellectualizing this information there is a lack of real integration of what another is experiencing into one's awareness. This lack of integration and awareness can be a barrier between counselor and client such that the counselor doesn't really "*get it*" with regard to what the client is attempting to express and communicate (Anderson & Middleton). The counselor may miss the deeper/subtler experiences, feelings, and issues that the client is sharing; either by over generalization of the client's cultural background, or by failing to truly understand the impact of the issue and/or experience on the client. Furthermore, this lack of awareness and deeper understanding has the potential for bringing up negative counter transferences in the counselor if he/she feels threatened as his/her own cultural background is juxtaposed with his/her client's (Anderson & Middleton).

Unfortunately, most training programs concentrate on "knowing that" there are cultural differences, rather than "knowing how" to effectively work with those from different cultures (Johnson, 1987). This may stem, in part, because of a tendency for faculty of counselor training programs to think of multicultural awareness as a conceptual or philosophical ideal, rather than something to truly encounter and experience (Grillo, 2005). As well, the discomfort often associated with addressing and experiencing multicultural issues can cause training professionals to avoid encounters and discussions focused on them (Doston & Tromski, 2003; Guth and Tyler, 1999). Many studies have shown that training professionals are not well versed in conducting intensive experiential processes to engage multicultural issues directly, (Hyde & Ruth, 2002). Even when training programs do engage in group work training, which is inherently experiential, there has been a historical emphasis on controlled and structured group processes. This

emphasis avoids the uncomfortable and difficult issues that would potentially arise in less structured groups (Bemak, 2005). Processes and activities involving group exercises and *icebreakers* “commonly focus on happy and positive thoughts and feelings, at the expense of allowing an examination of more painful issues” (Bemak, p.1). As a result, there is an increased tendency to avoid this method of teaching the more difficult issues of privilege and oppression; further fostering tentative and hesitant attitudes in both the teachers and students (Hyde & Ruth). Yet, research has found that those who are in daily contact with culturally different people are more multiculturally competent (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers). The findings of a study exploring the experiences of supervisors and supervisees in multicultural supervision indicate that exposing supervisees to culturally different supervisors positively influences their awareness of self and others, and thus their multicultural development (Ortega-Villalobos, Pope-Davis, & Toporeck, 2004). Holcomb-McCoy & Myers’ (1999) research indicating that many counseling professionals believe to have attained much of their multicultural competence in post degree work with culturally different clients supports the idea that experiencing the cultures of others is essential for a counselor’s multicultural development. Tromski and Doston’s (2003) research in particular has shown that an experiential component of training has a significant impact on multicultural awareness, understanding, and skill.

Perhaps the traditional methods of teaching about multicultural issues are most important for attaining a broadly based, general impression of a specific culture’s norms and characteristic worldviews (Greenley, 1992). Yet the exclusive use of traditional teaching methods in training programs creates a dangerous potential for stereotyping that could occur when not considering the unique attributes and experiences of the individual.

It would be erroneous to try to make a particular client fit into the generalized impression of his/her culture based on assumptions drawn from previous traditional learning experiences (Delucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004). For in doing so, one ignores the individual life experience of the client (Greenley; Stables, 2005). Rather, this information can be more appropriately and effectively used as a backdrop. This backdrop can be very helpful in informing a counselor when attempting to understand and/or considering possible interpretations of certain behaviors, views, and styles of communication that are different from his/her own cultural norms (Greenley).

Using Experiential Methods in Teaching and Learning about Multicultural Issues

As stated earlier, experiential exercises are paramount in enabling a person to integrate the learning obtained through traditional methods; thereby having a truer understanding of how and in what way that learning applies to individuals, as well as to themselves. A crucial step in moving toward greater awareness lies in exploring what is referred to as *racial identity development* (Delucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004; McNeill, 2001). Racial identity development is comprised of several stages of awareness that an individual moves through by exploring and understanding how his/her race and culture affect his/her unique identity, and influences his/her worldview and interactions with others. This is of particular importance for counselors as it greatly affects how they view the process of counseling as well as their clients (Delucia-Waack & Donigian).

Sue and Sue (1999) have developed a *universal model* of racial identity development based on similarities between different *culture-specific* models of racial identity development. They identified the following stages of growth: conformist, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection, and integrative awareness. In the

conformist stage, individuals internalize negative attitudes and beliefs about minority groups, while idealizing all aspects of the dominant racial-cultural group. In the *dissonance* stage, one experiences a sense of confusion about his/her racial-cultural identity. There is an emerging awareness of racism and oppression and a growing appreciation for one's own cultural background. The *resistance and immersion* stage is characterized by idealization of one's cultural group while viewing the dominant racial-culture group with disdain. Individuals in this stage immerse themselves in all aspects of their culture in an effort to learn all they can, while rejecting dominant cultural norms. Individuals in the *introspection* stage are motivated to explore their own sense of personal autonomy and the way in which they relate to their own racial-cultural group as well as other groups. This is characterized by an effort to reach out to other groups, including the dominant group, while moving away from the idealization of their own racial-cultural group. The final stage, *integrative awareness*, encompasses a more complex racial-cultural identity, incorporating a new worldview and a personality that is more perceptive and aware (D'Andrea, 2003).

Racial identity development is an experiential learning process. It is not something that can be attained solely through lecture and/or reading knowledge, what Agazarian (1997) refers to as "comprehensive" knowledge. "Comprehensive" knowledge is arrived at through thinking and imagining, as opposed to what he calls "apprehensive" knowledge, which is arrived at through feeling and must be translated into words. "Apprehensive" knowledge is inherently experiential and is accessed by one's intuition (Agazarian, 1997). True learning, understanding, and awareness are achieved when both *thinking knowledge* and intuitive, *experiential knowledge* are

integrated. Thus, experiential learning processes play a crucial role in consolidating and integrating into one's awareness, the theoretical, "comprehensive" multicultural learning initially taught in traditional formats.

Experiential learning is essential in helping an individual to notice and understand the differences that *may* or *may not* exist between themselves and culturally different individuals, as well as individuals within his/her own cultural group. This is particularly important as many counselors are tentative, and even anxious, about counseling culturally diverse clients, realizing that traditional methods of counseling often do not effectively attend to their needs (Lee & Richardson, 1991). Lee and Richardson (1991) believe that it is not likely that an effective, all encompassing "how-to manual" could be created to work with culturally diverse clients. As well, Slattery (2004) suggests that learning about diverse cultures is a personal journey rather than a destination; implying that it is experiential and never really completed to the point where it fits neatly into a defined, structured, comprehensive idea. Stables (2005) maintains that an individual's "personal positioning" is as important to consider as his/her cultural heritage when attempting to understand them as culturally different from oneself. Counselors "may not be able to respond to persons as individuals on the basis of an understanding of collective cultural differences" (Stables, 2005, p.185). This further illustrates the notion that while one may be well versed in the general norms of a particular culture, until they have an experience of that culture, they may miss the ways in which this information applies or does not apply to particular individuals (Delucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004). Ponterotto and Casas (1987) also assert that effective multicultural counseling necessitates more than simply having knowledge of a client's cultural background. Unfortunately, individual

differences are often explained in terms of collective cultural assumptions, which leave little room for a genuine and accurate exploration of an individual's experience (Stables). Rather what is needed is an understanding and awareness of both the client's cultural background and the how client interacts as an individual with the dominant cultural within which he/she exists. In light of this, Dyche and Zayas (1995) suggest that it is best for counselors and group leaders to approach their clients with *cultural naiveté*. This approach encourages the suspension of what one "knows" about different cultures and ethnicities so that one can learn about his/her clients from the stories of their individual experiences. For the complex mix of race, culture, ethnicity, community, family, and individual values, strongly influences the identity of an individual and needs to be taken into consideration when working with clients (Delucia-Waack & Donigian).

In a study done by Hansen and Williams (2003), it was found that graduate students were more satisfied with modern experiential methods of teaching and learning about multicultural issues rather than the traditional, didactic models. There are many different experiential teaching methods and processes for increasing cultural awareness of others as well as oneself. Some of these include group therapy and/or group discussion (Singer & Smith, 2003; Leonard, 1996; McNeill, 2001; Yalom, 1995), bibliotherapy (reading of the diverse experiences of others) (Hansen & Williams, 2003; Singer & Smith), family and community genograms (Slattery, 2004), cultural immersion experiences, shadowing of professionals in diverse settings, and interactive drama (Doston & Tromski, 2003). Doston and Tromski (2003) have noted that researchers have suggested that experiential processes have a greater impact on attitudes and behavior than

rationally processed information. As such, they fully support Tyler and Guth's (1999) belief that experiential learning is the most useful process to engage with students.

The benefits of a group format

The main function of a group format is experiential learning. For this reason, it is particularly useful and effective in teaching about multicultural issues. This format provides an opportunity for group members to juxtapose what they have learned through traditional methods, with the reality of other individuals in the group. As well, and perhaps of greater importance, this format provides an opportunity for group members to gain greater self-awareness (Singer & Smith, 2003; Leonard, 1996; McNeill, 2001; Yalom, 1995). Run in an effective way, the group format provides the safety necessary to explore ideas, behaviors, and assumptions that might otherwise be unexplored as a result of being too sensitive and/or controversial. As well, it provides the opportunity for differing views and abilities of the group members to come together in an effort to overcome obstacles and find solutions to issues that may otherwise seem insurmountable (Doston & Tromski, 2003).

Therefore, when attempting to run a safe, meaningful, and productive multicultural group experience, it is very important that the group leader be able to assess how their own level of racial identity development, as well as that of the clients, will affect the counseling process (D'Andrea, 2003). For if they have not advanced to the higher stages/levels of racial identity development, they may pose a danger by giving token or superficial reference to issues of oppression and racism without truly understanding them (Donigian & Delucia-Waack).

Even if the teaching method for of a particular training program is somewhat experiential, there may be little opportunity for either sharing of one's experience or getting feedback from others regarding one's behaviors, assumptions, questions, and/or observations. Group discussions can be a way to avoid missing this important opportunity for further insight and integration of what has been taught (Singer & Smith, 2003).

Hypothesis

It is the researcher's hypothesis that even with an extensive experiential component to their learning, given the opportunity to have open discussion in a group setting students will experience and learn something new about themselves and each other that they may not have considered or been aware of before. In this way, they will more fully consolidate and integrate what they have learned in previous course exercises and assignments.

The first objective of the following exercise was for each student to gain self-awareness of how his/her culture affects his/her perspective, attitudes, judgments, expectations, and decision making. Secondly, it was for them to have an experience, and some understanding and awareness, of how every other student is affected by his/her own culture (even to notice within-culture differences). The third objective of the exercise would be for them to have some experience and understanding of how to respect, accommodate, and communicate with those of a different culture, as well as "negotiate" those differences in order to effectively manage and/or work together.

Through the group discussion experience, it was expected that students would gain personal insight into how they are informed and affected by their own culture.

Students would also gain awareness of others and how they are informed and affected by their culture. Finally, students would learn to understand more fully and communicate more effectively with others from different cultural experiences, while honoring and accommodating their differences.

Methods

Setting

The participants for this research project are students enrolled in a course focusing on multicultural/cross-cultural issues in the world of international business. This course is part of a northeastern university's MBA program concentrating in international business. It is a private university enrolling roughly 13,000 undergraduate students and 2,300 graduate students. Roughly fifty-percent of students in the program are themselves international students. The professor's chosen teaching method is highly experiential in nature, involving many class projects that incorporate team work, research, and presentations.

Participant Sample

Thirty students in total participated in the study. Most of students enrolled in the international business MBA program have had extensive experience working in different countries and so have been exposed to a number of different cultures. The participants ranged in age from early twenties or late forties. The class was made up of roughly fifty-percent international students from varying countries, including: The Bahamas, Bangladesh, France, India, Russia, Thailand, and Taiwan. Twenty of the students were male, and 10 were female. All participants were graduate students enrolled in the MBA program at the university where the study was conducted.

Procedure

Permission to conduct this study was given by the course professor. As well, the university's Institutional Review Board gave approval for the study to be conducted at their site with students from their university. Participation in the group discussion in no way affected the grade of the students, regardless of their level of involvement or the content of their interactions. The discussion topics stayed focused on what it was like to manage in the multicultural context of the class project being debriefed. The numbering system excluded the use of names and subsequently there is no record of who specifically participated in the study. This information was made clear to the participants along with instructions given just prior to the group experience.

The study entailed a group discussion and debriefing of a class assigned project in which different teams attempted to bring an American based company to a foreign market. The debriefing itself was focused on the multicultural issues related to managing and working with a team whose members come from different cultural backgrounds, and what the experience was like for its project managers and team members.

The structure and activities of the group were as follows (given an hour and a half to two hours of time in total): The first five to ten minutes were used to review the group norms/"rules" and expectations of each member. These included the following: Above all else, it was important for each participant to be sensitive and considerate to others in the group. Group members were to engage each other within an atmosphere of openness and trust, being respectful of other's points of view. With this in mind, group members were strongly encouraged to be truthful and honest in all sharing and interacting, bearing in mind how others would receive or react to their delivery. It was important for all

group members to share freely rather than in a structured way, but to do so sensitively. Group members were encouraged to keep the interactions and sharing lively, and to ask questions and/or make comments as the discussion evolved. It would be each group member's personal choice of whether or not they want to share, reflect, react, or respond to any given comment or question.

There was 90 minutes for open reflection, sharing, reaction, and feedback with regard to their team experience in completing the class project. The topics of discussion were to revolve around the questions asked on the questionnaire.

The last ten minutes was used for students to comment on what they had learned, how the group discussion/experience was for them, and wrap up. The researcher gave the professor and the students a report as to how effective or ineffective the group was as a learning/integrating tool for multicultural issues.

Evaluation

The "test" of the effectiveness of this group experience was measured in this way: Each student was given two short answer questionnaires (appendix A & B). These questionnaires assessed each student's cultural perspective and how this affects his/her attitudes, judgment, expectations, and assumptions about them self and others, as well as their decision making, when working on a project with others. A pre-group questionnaire (A) was given before the group discussion/experience to assess the participants' thinking about various multicultural issues before the group experience. A post-group questionnaire (B) of the same questions, with one additional question at the end, was given after the group discussion, to be handed in to the professor the following week.

In this way, questionnaire “B” was a qualitative measure of any *significant change* in how the participants thought about multicultural issues as a result of their reflecting, sharing, listening, and reacting in the multicultural group experience. When analyzing participant responses for change, the researcher has characterized “significant change” as reflecting a more concrete awareness and understanding of how one’s culturally conditioned attitude, thinking, and behavior impact the multicultural issues in question. This may include cultural references to one’s self, and how these affect the interactions and relationships he/she has with others in the group. This might also include language that demonstrates a clearer understanding of how their own cultural conditioning affects their likes, dislikes, and interests, as well as that of others. These key themes will also be looked for in the group as a whole. Being that the researcher created this questionnaire, there is no established validity or reliability to the measure.

All pre and post-questionnaires remained anonymous and were organized with a numbering system. Gender, race, and ethnicity information were gathered at the top of the questionnaires. All participants were clearly informed by verbal instruction that it was their choice to respond, or not respond, to all or any of the questions. As well, they were informed that in any case their grade would not be affected.

Results

At the end of the group discussion experience, the professor stated to the researcher and the participants, that from her perspective, the group discussion was very meaningful and valuable with regard to the courses stated objective of teaching and integrating multicultural issues into the students’ awareness. She went on to say that she believed that this type of experiential interaction among classmates was important and

useful enough for her to consider including it as a permanent part of her course activity in the future (personal communication, January 25, 2006).

Of the thirty participants who filled out and handed in questionnaire “A”, twelve filled out and handed in questionnaire “B” the following week. Of these, six were project managers on the project being debriefed, while six were regular team members. As a result, there were forty-two chances for the responses to reflect “significant change” from the pre-group questionnaire to the post-group questionnaire. Of these forty-two responses, thirty-four did not reflect significant change in perspective. For example, many of the responses were virtually the same on both questionnaires. In other examples, participants responded in less detail and addressed fewer ideas on questionnaire “B” than on the first questionnaire “A”. There are a number of reasons that could account for this. To begin with, not every participant in every experiential exercise is going to have a deeper level of understanding and awareness of every issue being worked through. This is particularly true when, like in this study, the group discussion experience happens only once. Multiple group experiences would provide a much more adequate opportunity for participants to reach a new perspective and deeper level of understanding. This is important because the way an issue is addressed in once experience may be meaningful to some participants, but not to others. As well, a participant may be personally engrossed in a deeper exploration of a particular issue and so be preoccupied and less likely to see and identify with other issues being explored at the same time.

In addition, the participants in this study were rather experienced with working in diverse cultural settings. Many students have worked abroad and studied in different countries. As well, the international students themselves were immersed in American

culture at this university. Given this, the change with regard to their level of multicultural understanding and awareness could very well be less than those who do not have extensive experience with diverse cultures. Some participants were so experienced and savvy enough already as to have rather sophisticated understandings and perceptions of themselves and others. For example, for question four on questionnaire “A”, a participant responded in the following way: “In this project, I found myself consciously aware that culture, and specifically my western trained method of thinking, might lead to problems. Accordingly, I made efforts to take that perspective issue into account before I did/said anything.” Given this response, it is evident that this participant already has a sensitive awareness of the impact his cultural conditioning has on his behavior, and the possible troubling impact it might have on others. Therefore, it is little wonder that his/her response to this question on the post-discussion questionnaire did not show significant change. From a different angle, there is the notion that for some, having a significant amount of experience in an area can often make it difficult to “think outside the box”. From this point of view, it may be difficult to see things differently or from a new perspective, thus leaving one stuck in the conditioned perspective that has consistently been relied upon to understand multicultural experiences.

For questions one through four, some differences in answers between questionnaires “A” and “B” indicate a deeper level of thinking and awareness for many participants. For example, a respondent to question four on “A” wrote the following: “Felt that I took over presentations.” While he/she answered the same question on “B” in the following way: “Seen as an individualist rather than a collectivist.” Looking only at the first response, it could be surmised that the participant was simply a person who

forced their opinions and views on others, regardless of cultural influences. The group discussion helped the participant to think of this question within a multicultural context, thus increasing the participant's awareness of multicultural issues. It can be seen in the second response to the question that the participant was thinking about his/her answer from a multicultural perspective, and understanding the nature of his/her behavior in relation to the behavior of others; understanding the cultural influences behind thinking and behavior.

In another example, a participant gave the following response to question two on questionnaire "A": "No, again this was a mono-cultural group." While to the same question on questionnaire "B", he responded in this way: "Not really. One student did mention that in Ohio they spend more time building relationships and are not as task oriented as 'New Yorkers'." This response reflects the participants changing perspective. While he was still of the mind set that there were no multicultural issues that needed to be taken into consideration, he was willing to be open to what others were sharing. The first part of his answer, "Not really..." reflects his willingness to listen and is less absolute than his first answer "No,...". As well, he became aware that there are significant within-culture differences that need to be taken into consideration when interacting and communicating with others. This awareness was reflected in his response and showed his openness in listening to what others have to say without dismissing it.

Reviewing the responses to question five on the post group questionnaire ("Has the group discussion changed or affected the way you now think about the answers to the preceding questions? If so, how has the discussion helped you to think differently?) is of most significance when attempting to measure the effectiveness and meaningfulness of

the group discussion experience. Of the twelve participants that handed in questionnaire “B”, nine answered question five in an affirmative way, indicating they had gained some new insight from the group discussion experience. Two of the respondents indicated that they did not gain any new insights or ideas as a result of the group discussion. One respondent neglected to answer the question.

In reviewing the answers to question 5 on questionnaire “B”, it is clear that the group discussion experience prompted new ideas and ways of thinking about the multicultural issues for a significant portion of those who handed it in. One participant responded to the question in the following way: “Yes. I was aware that there were cultural factors at play in the group, but it wasn’t until the discussion that I could articulate how it actually occurred.” This response is an excellent example of what is meant by consolidating and integrating what one has learned. Before the group discussion, the participant had only an abstract awareness of the multicultural factors play. Through the group discussion experience he was able to think more clearly and concretely about these factors, and thus gain a better understanding of them.

Another American participant responded to question five in this way: “Yes, I now think that the international students are really more like me than I thought.” In this response, the participant is demonstrating her new awareness that those who are culturally different are not necessarily totally different from her as an individual. This is a powerful counterpoint to the common assumption that one cannot relate to or communicate well with those who are ethnically and culturally different from one’s self. As well, it brings to mind the idea that within-culture differences may at times be more overt than cross-cultural one. This is further illustrated in the following response to the

same question, from yet another participant: “The group discussion opened me up to the idea that there are many subcultures within a culture that need to be taken into account. One example was with a US student wanting to chat before getting to business rather than another students desire to just jump into things.” Here again, the group discussion experience brought to this participant a new awareness that within-culture differences are often as important to consider as cross-cultural ones.

For another participant, the question was answered in this way: “I enjoyed listening to the experiences of the foreign students. Additionally views the on treatment of younger managers was very interesting. This was a very worth while exercise.” This reaction and response is consistent with Hansen and Williams’ (2003), study indicating that graduate students prefer and were more satisfied with experiential methods of teaching as opposed to traditional, didactic methods.

With the benefit of increased self-awareness in mind, the following responses reflect of the effectiveness of a group format: “I think it has made me see how I really like control and structure in my work”, and from another participant, “I want to be more supportive of the management styles of different nations. Try not to take ‘American Management’ principles and apply them to a foreign country situation.” These responses indicate that the participants are thinking about how their own cultural conditioning, and perhaps innate personalities as well, effects their likes and dislikes. What’s more, they are thinking about how these preferences may impact others from different cultures (Greely, 1992). This level of understanding is a great help in adopting behaviors that are sensitive and attentive to the cultural norms and expectations of others, which in turn is very valuable when developing a working relationship.

Finally, the following responses reflect the effectiveness of a group format for bringing about a new awareness of others: “Yes. It made me more aware of the issues international students face when trying to adjust to US culture; keeping their native culture.”, and “The group discussion was great for recognizing why people act the way they do in team/work situations.” This level of understanding goes a long way in increasing cultural acceptance, as well as opening a person up to adapt and accommodate behaviors from those who are culturally different.

All of these responses reflect a deeper, and in many ways subtler and more nuanced awareness of multicultural issues. This deeper level of understanding and awareness is an important step forward in the journey of attaining multicultural competence (Slattery, 2004). As well, they represent another step down the path of racial identity development (Delucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004). This is especially true of the response of an American participant who recognized that the international students were not as different from her as she had previously thought.

Though the researcher had a written set of questions to prompt the group, he allowed the discussion to be organic in nature by refraining from over structuring the group in order to lead the participants in a preconceived direction. In this way, the discussion was very natural and went in the direction, and to the topics, that were most necessary and meaningful to the group members. This can be yet another strength of the group format, as it follows the lead of the group members to explore the ideas and issues that are most meaningful to them. In this way, group members are able to gain awareness and insight into the areas that are most genuinely important to them as individuals, rather than erroneously following a preconceived notion of what is important to the group

leader/teacher. As well, because this follows the group members' natural path of interest and learning, it will be most meaningful and effective.

Discussion

In looking at the results it is evident that the objectives of the exercise were reached for some students. The experiential nature of the group discussion invoked new, important, and meaningful ways of thinking about and addressing multicultural issues. As well, the group discussion helped some students to integrate and consolidate the learning attained in their class project that otherwise may have remained very abstract and perhaps less informative. The group format provided a venue for the students to witness one another's unique perspectives by having a "face to face" experience. By juxtaposing what had been learned through traditional methods with the reality of the group members in front of them, participants were given a chance to understand how generalized cultural information applies or does not apply to individuals (Leonard, 1996; McNeill, 2001; Singer & Smith, 2003). As well, participants were afforded an opportunity to see how different levels of acculturation can affect the degree to which cultural norms inform one's thinking and behavior.

Limitations

This study, while supported by the professor and incorporated into the course curriculum, was not the typical sort of exercise that these students had encountered before. Consistent with the professor's disclosure regarding the class, some of these MBA students appeared to be focused on getting their schoolwork done as quickly as possible. These same students seemed to be most interested in getting through the exercise, with less focus on really learning from it; very task oriented rather than learning

oriented per se. This is not to suggest that they had no interest and were choosing to disregard the exercise. Perhaps saying that this type of learning was not their focus of interest is more accurate. Thus the outcome of the study was perhaps less telling than if it were done with students from the helping professions who might inherently have more of a humanistic concern and interest in multicultural issues as they relate to individuals. However, it must be stated that the majority of the students appeared to be fully engaged and involved in the discussion, keeping it lively and organic.

Another limitation of the study was the time allowed for the project to be run. Asking the participants to complete the post-group questionnaire "B" at a later date and bring it to class the following week was done because there was insufficient time during the class for them to complete it immediately. Thus, there were substantially less post-group questionnaires returned as might otherwise have been. This would obviously have given the researcher a greater picture of how the group discussion affected the participants' multicultural understanding and awareness. In particular, since roughly two thirds of the participants appeared to be engaged in the discussion, but only half handed in questionnaire "B", it is difficult to tell if those who were not engaged gleaned anything just by observing. If nearly all of the post-group questionnaires had been handed in, the results may have had group wide implications (if not individual) as to the benefit of the group experience even to participants that did not engage in the discussion.

Strengths

As stated earlier, the participants in this study were already rather experienced in working with diverse cultures, and therein lies a major strength of this study. Because these participants have already had a lot of experience with multicultural issues, as

opposed to just traditional learning experiences, any change brought about by the group discussion would be that much more meaningful. This implies is that even with experienced individuals, group discussion experiences can play a powerful role in enhancing one's perception, awareness, and understanding of issues with regard to themselves and others. The group discussion format provided a chance for participants to talk to each other in a candid and direct way, while addressing issues that otherwise might be left unexplored (Leonard, 1996; Singer & Smith, 2003).

A previously mentioned limitation, namely that these MBA students may not have the same learning interest with regard to these issues as students in the helping professions, might also be considered a strength. These students were positively affected by the group discussion even though they may not have a humanistic focus to their learning. This implies that the person to person experience of a group format can elicit understanding and communication in group members who might not be outwardly focused on such learning or even aware that it is happening in that moment (Leonard, 1996).

Implications and Recommendations

The results to this study suggest that an experiential method of teaching multicultural issues can have a significant impact on the level of understanding and awareness that students acquire. What's more, it can be inferred that by having such a significant effect on the learning of student already well versed in multicultural issues, it will have an even greater influence and impact on students who have had minimal exposure to and experience of these issues. This supports the idea that it is especially important for counselor training programs to incorporate these experiences into their core

curriculum. Along these same lines, counselor trainees may be inherently more interested in seeking understanding and awareness of another's experience, as apposed to MBA students who may be inherently more interested in getting the task accomplished in order to move on to the next step. Thus, using this type of experiential exercise with counselor trainees could well prove to be much more effective given their level of interest and subsequent level of participation. Using this type of group experience within other social environments, such as churches, community centers, businesses, and schools, may also play an important role in building understanding, awareness, trust, safety, cooperation, and unity.

Several adjustments and changes could be made to the group format and the questionnaires. The group would most likely be more effective and produce more accurate and useful results if it were to be run once a week over the course of six to eight weeks. In this way there would be a chance to analyze the results for greater degrees of multicultural awareness and understanding, paying particular attention to movement with regard to racial identity development. As well, by running the group over a longer period of time, the results would be more consistent and therefore more reliable. Rather than debriefing one particular project, different topics could be explored each week or over several weeks should they warrant the time. This would provide experiences to explore a wider range of multicultural issues. With regard to the questionnaires, the questions would have to be created in a more generic fashion as opposed to addressing a specific topic or project. As well, it would be much more effective to have the participants fill out and hand in questionnaire "B" at the end of the group, whether it was the last in a

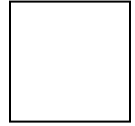
series or a one time experience. Participants are much more likely to fill it out and hand it in.

Conclusions

Having a first hand experience of the multicultural issues one is learning about is of paramount importance when searching for a real world, working understanding of it. Traditional methods of learning (i.e., lectures, textbooks, etc.) are necessary first steps in beginning the journey of multicultural learning. This foundational learning provides a context within which later experiences can begin to be understood. Yet it is the experiences themselves that bring about true understanding and awareness. For traditional learning methods, without the benefit of experience, have the potential for creating and/or perpetuating stereotypes and assumptions about those who are culturally different from one's self. When addressing multicultural issues learning in the training programs for counselors and others, both in and out of the helping professions, incorporating experiential teaching methods and practices will continue to be a very important as the face of society continues to be more and more global and diverse in nature. Experiencing one another, with the chance to explore and understand what we have experienced, though often not the most comfortable, is the most effective way to truly learn about ourselves and others.

Appendix A

Questionnaire A:



Please fill in the following demographic information about yourself:

Your Gender - Female / Male

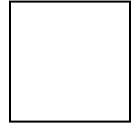
Your ethnicity/culture & country of origin_____

Answer the following questions as truthfully as possible. If you need more room, you can use the back of the sheet. If you were not a manager, please mark question #1 N/A:

1. Were there cross-cultural/multicultural issues that needed to be taken into consideration when working with your management partner? If so, what were they?
2. Were there cross-cultural/multicultural issues that needed to be taken into consideration when working with your team members? If so, what were they?
3. How might your own cultural and ethnic background have affected the way you thought about and approached this task as a manager or a team member?
4. How might your own cultural and ethnic background have affected the way you approached and related to your team members?

Appendix B

Questionnaire B:



Please fill in the following demographic information about yourself:

Your Gender - Female / Male

Your ethnicity/culture & country of origin_____

After having participated in, or observed, the group discussion look at the following questions again. Answer the questions as truthfully as possible. If you need more room, you can use the back of the sheet. If you were not a manager, please mark question #1 N/A:

1. Were there cross-cultural/multicultural issues that needed to be taken into consideration when working with your management partner? If so, what were they?

2. Were there cross-cultural/multicultural issues that needed to be taken into consideration when working with your team members? If so, what were they?

3. How might your own cultural and ethnic background have affected the way you thought about and approached this task as a manager or a team member?

4. How might your own cultural and ethnic background have affected the way you approached and related to your team members?

5. Has the group discussion changed or affected the way you now think about the answers to the preceding questions? If so, how has the discussion helped you to think differently?

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