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The Lived Experience of Cultural Immersion

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a grounded theory study of 3 graduate students' lived experience of cultural immersion. Results indicated that participants experienced 3 phases (goal setting, interaction, and evaluation) and 4 themes (bias, gender, barriers, and self-awareness) during immersion. Recommendations for the implementation of immersion experiences are discussed.

A belief in the life-altering power of interpersonal contact is essential to the practice of counseling (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005). Meaningful interpersonal contact aids counselors in understanding the worldview of, developing empathy for, and caring for their clients—core conditions of the humanistic counseling tradition (Hazler, 2001). Prolonged interpersonal cross-cultural interactions are an essential element in this process because they reduce bias and increase cultural understanding (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010), aiding counselors in recognizing their clients' humanity. Therefore, cultural immersion experiences that promote sustained and meaningful cross-cultural interactions can be an effective training tool for counselors (Pope-Davis, Breau, & Liu, 1997).

Cultural immersion experiences require participants to have interactions with a cultural community that is different from their own (Pope-Davis et al., 1997). The limited research that exists on cultural immersion indicates that participation in these experiences results in increased understanding of diverse communities, promotion of self-awareness, and reduced biases (Alexander, Kruczek, & Ponterotto, 2005; Canfield, Low, & Hovestadt, 2009; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005). However, Canfield et al. (2009) called for research to identify the elements of the cultural immersion experience that promote growth and understanding in counselors-in-training.

To understand the lived experience of cultural immersion and identify the elements of this experience that promote counselor growth, a qualitative study was conducted. This study used grounded theory to analyze the narratives of three graduate-level counseling students who participated in a cultural immersion experience called the *Multicultural Action Project*. The researchers (the first author and graduate students) found that these students passed through three distinct phases (goal setting, interaction, and evaluation) and dealt with issues related to biases, gender, barriers, and self-awareness as part of their immersion experience, which resulted in self-reported growth in the students. On the basis of these findings, we discuss how counselor educators can structure and support students engaged in cultural immersion experiences.

Cultural Immersion Experiences

Cultural immersion experiences were designed to provide students with in vivo training while serving culturally diverse communities (Pope-Davis et al., 1997). Cultural immersion experiences require participants to engage in activities with, or provide services to, a cultural community different from their own over an extended period of time (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Ishii, Gilbride, & Stensrud, 2009; Pope-Davis et al., 1997). It is believed that the interpersonal contact that occurs during the immersion experience promotes affective and behavioral growth in counseling students and simultaneously provides students with insight into the lives of diverse communities (Canfield et al., 2009; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). Cultural immersion projects typically require some form of self-reflection, which is believed to increase self-awareness (Canfield et al., 2009; Pope-Davis et al., 1997).

The existent research on cultural immersion experiences provides an indication of the efficacy of these projects in increasing cross-cultural understanding and self-awareness in counseling students (Alexander et al., 2005; Canfield et al., 2009; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Ishii et al., 2009; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010) but does little to highlight the experience of students during immersion. A recent review of counselor education, marriage and family therapy, and psychology literature yielded five articles on cultural immersion projects. Alexander et al. (2005), Canfield et al. (2009), and Tomlinson-Clarke and Clarke (2010) discussed the process of developing and implementing cultural immersion experiences. These authors noted that students experienced increased awareness, reduced biases, and improved understanding and respect for diverse communities. Unfortunately, these articles do not provide insight into students' experiences during cultural immersion—ignoring the internal processes and humanistic elements that occurred during and after the experience.

Of the five published articles on cultural immersion, DeRicco and Sciarra (2005) best chronicled the experience of immersion for a graduate student. They presented the immersion experience of a White, female student in an African American suburb. Using excerpts from DeRicco's journal, kept during the immersion, the authors documented how she initially intellectualized her understanding of the

community, uncovered unconscious fears about the community, realized the benefits of White privilege, and ultimately realized how her self-absorption created a barrier to interaction. Although this analysis provides insight into the cultural immersion experience, it does not highlight the aspects of the immersion experience that facilitated the growth of the student. To understand the growth process for graduate students, a more detailed examination of cultural immersion is necessary.

The Multicultural Action Program (MAP)

The immersion experience studied in this article is the MAP. The MAP was developed by Max Parker (C. C. Lee, personal communication, February 10, 2009). The MAP is a semester-long assignment in which students immerse themselves in a community culturally different from their own. As part of the MAP, students identify emotional and educational objectives they seek to attain while completing three levels of involvement (observation, information seeking, and direct action).

In the observation level of the MAP, students learn about their chosen community through activities that do not require direct engagement, such as attending a movie, a lecture, or a community meeting. In the information level, students research the values, issues, and needs of their chosen community by directly interacting with community members. To complete this level of the assignment, students may visit centers, agencies, or political advocacy offices; meet community leaders; or survey community members. In the direct action level, students provide community service. Possibilities for service include volunteering at local agencies or becoming a member of a community group. At the conclusion of the MAP, students write a report documenting their cognitive and emotional reactions to the immersion experience and compare their observations of their chosen community with the counseling literature related to this community.

Method

Guiding Questions

What is the lived experience of cultural immersion for graduate students? and What elements of the immersion experience contribute to student growth?

Ontology

A qualitative research design was selected to obtain the “lived experience”—or insider perspective—of cultural immersion. A qualitative research design seeks to understand a phenomenon from the personal perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, qualitative research provides a rich description of the experiences of the participants and allows the voices of participants to be heard (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the goal of conducting a qualitative examination of the cultural immersion experience of graduate students was to provide readers with insight into the lived experience of cultural immersion and to identify the elements of the experience that promoted student growth. (Please note that participants in this study assumed multiple roles. They were members of the research team, involved in data analyses, and served as coauthors for this article. The practice of using participant researchers is consistent with many qualitative research traditions [Haverkamp, 2005]. To respect this level of involvement, the participants will be referred to as *researchers*.)

Methodology

According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), grounded theory seeks to describe a phenomenon for which limited theory exists. The aim of grounded theory is to build a theory “grounded” in the data provided by research participants (Merriam, 2002). Given the limited understanding of immersion experiences of graduate students and the lack of theory to explain the elements of experience that contribute to student growth, grounded theory was selected as the methodology for this study. Grounded theory respects the perspectives of participants by not imposing a hypothesis or theory to explain their lived experience. Instead, theory and knowledge are created based on the experiences of participants. Fassinger (2005) discussed the promise of grounded theory in counseling research, noting that it integrates theory and practice in ways no other methodology is capable of doing.

Researchers

In qualitative research, researchers must address their “positionality,” particularly their social identities as these identities influence all stages of the research process (Jones et al., 2006). The first author, a 33-year-old, heterosexual, Chicano male, is a counselor educator of middle socioeconomic status. In addition to serving as the principal investigator, he was also the instructor for the course in which the cultural immersion experience being studied took place. It is possible that his dual roles as instructor and principle investigator might have influenced the decision of the other researchers to participate in this study, the content of the narratives composed by the researchers, and all findings associated with this study.

The researchers (Jennifer, Elaine, and Erica) were all 1st-year graduate students in counseling who identify as White females. Two of the researchers identify as heterosexual and the third identifies as queer. The researchers were between the ages of 29 and 30 years and reported coming from lower middle to middle socioeconomic statuses. Erica's cultural immersion project focused on women who are incarcerated, Elaine's focused on people who are homeless, and Jennifer's focused on people over the age of 65 years. (Please note that the researchers decided not to use pseudonyms, which is an accepted practice in qualitative research [Jones et al., 2006].)

Setting

This study took place at an urban university in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The university is a public, 4-year, research-intensive institution with a counselor education program that enrolls approximately 250 graduate students annually. This study took place in conjunction with a graduate-level multicultural counseling course that has a cultural immersion experience as a course requirement.

Recruitment

The researchers in this study were recruited from the aforementioned multicultural counseling course. Consistent with the traditions of grounded theory (Fassinger, 2005), purposeful sampling was used to select participants who represented “information-rich cases” and who could best aid in understanding the phenomenon under investigation (Jones et al., 2006). To this end, the first author sought researchers who demonstrated self-awareness (awareness of values, biases, and beliefs), an ability to

self-reflect on their experiences (cognitively and emotionally), and an ability to express themselves in written English. The three researchers who best demonstrated the aforementioned inclusion criteria in their MAP proposals were invited to participate in this study. The researchers were informed that their participation would not influence their grade in the course and that they could drop out of the research study at any point without consequence. To ensure that participation in the research study did not influence the grades of the researchers, composition of narratives and all data analysis occurred at the end of the academic semester in which the researchers were students of the first author. This study was approved by the Human Subjects Research Committee of the university where the study took place, and each researcher provided informed consent.

Data Collection

Throughout the academic semester, the researchers kept a weekly journal documenting their thoughts, emotions, and activities associated with their immersion. There were no specific prompts for these journals; they were intended to serve as aids for the researchers in composing their final narratives. Upon completion of the academic term and their cultural immersions, the researchers composed a narrative describing their experiences. This narrative served as the basis for all data analysis in this study. Narratives were written on 18 to 21 double-spaced pages; each researcher presented the motives for selecting her chosen community and documented her experiences, thoughts, and emotions during the immersion.

Data Analysis

Consistent with grounded theory tradition (Jones et al., 2006), a constant comparative method of analysis was used in this study. In the constant comparative method, data analysis is structured and systematic, proceeding through three phases known as open, axial, and selective coding (Jones et al., 2006). This method of analysis was selected because it allows for large data sets to be synthesized into more manageable categories and themes, allowing themes to be more readily compared between narratives. Additionally, this method was selected because it provides a “trail of evidence” to support any conclusions (Jones et al., 2006).

During open coding, a line-by-line reading of each of the narratives was conducted, which led to the identification of 425 codes across all three narratives. In axial coding, the researchers began by comparing the categories within each individual narrative, and then they compared categories between the three narratives. This process led to the consolidation of similar codes, the elimination of codes deemed unrelated to the lived experience of cultural immersion, and the creation of new codes. Upon completion of axial coding, 45 codes remained. During selective coding, the researchers identified the core criteria that explained the lived experience of students engaged in cultural immersion. Three phases and four recurrent themes were identified, explaining the lived experience of cultural immersion.

[Figure 1](#) was created to explain the lived experience of cultural immersion. This figure shows the three phases of immersion researchers progressed through: goal setting, interaction, and evaluation. The figure also shows the four themes (biases, gender, barriers, and self-awareness) the researchers encountered during each of these phases. To demonstrate how the themes are connected to and influenced by each other, the authors joined the themes in a circle.

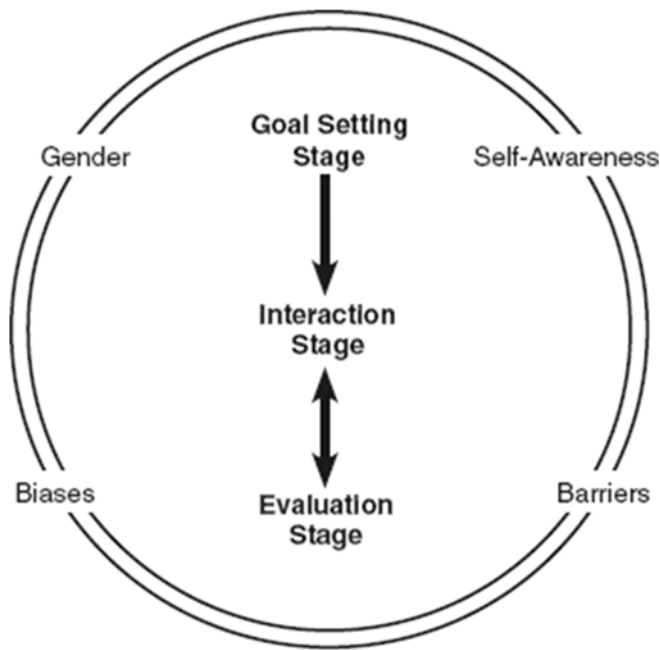


Figure 1

Three Stages Experienced by Students Engaged in Cultural Immersion and Four Issues Students Face in These Stages

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the notion of trustworthiness is understood as the authenticity and consistency of interpretations (Yeh & Inman, 2007). There are various methods used to accomplish this, and, in this study, a form of member checking was used to verify trustworthiness. During member checking, the researcher presents her findings to the research participants to ensure the accuracy of interpretations (Creswell, 2007). Although the research team met as a group to conduct all data analyses, the researcher whose narrative was being analyzed did not participate in the development and interpretation of codes from her narrative. Rather, her role was to provide clarification and to assess the accuracy of interpretations, thus providing an in vivo form of member checking. Additionally, an outside researcher, who was an employee of the university where this study took place and who is familiar with qualitative methods, was invited to examine all data and conclusions associated with this study. The outside researcher provided alternative interpretations of the data and agreed the conclusions drawn from this study were tenable.

Results

The results of this study are organized by themes and phases identified during the data analysis as being the core criteria of the lived experience of cultural immersion. Quotations from the researchers' narratives are provided to highlight the cognitive and emotional reactions of the researchers as well as their insights experienced during their cultural immersion.

The Phases of Cultural Immersion

The lived experience of cultural immersion entailed the three phases of goal setting, interaction, and evaluation. Goal setting began when researchers selected their chosen populations. Goal setting continued throughout the development of cognitive and emotional objectives related to the immersion experience and concluded when direct interaction with the chosen community began. The interaction phase refers to the period of time when the researchers were in direct contact with their chosen population. The evaluation phase of the immersion experience overlapped with the interaction phase and specifically refers to times when researchers would reflect on their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. The evaluation concluded when the researchers completed their narratives.

Bias

The theme of biases refers to the personal and social biases the researchers faced in each phase of the immersion experience. For Elaine, confronting her personal biases influenced her decision, during the goal-setting phase, to work with the homeless community: "I chose a population that not only I was uncomfortable with but that I also carried biases about. I not only wanted to increase my own personal knowledge on the population, but to truly realize my own biases." At various points during the interaction phase, Elaine dealt with her biases that people who are homeless are drug addicts, mentally unstable, and unclean. During the evaluation phase, Elaine reflected on how the connections she made with men who are homeless allowed her to realize and overcome her biases:

"Perhaps volunteering with [the homeless] and making them more "human," people, brothers, sisters and fathers is what is needed to allow the gap that exists to dissipate. I need to connect them to myself.... Perhaps remembering this next time I am in the presence of those that make me uncomfortable will ease the discomfort."

Although Erica and Jennifer did not select communities to necessarily challenge personal biases, they still confronted biases during their immersion experiences. The training Erica completed as a requirement for volunteers in the prison instilled in her biases and distrust of the inmate population. Erica described how the prison training indoctrinated distrust of inmates:

"I want to point to the incredible amount of distrust that we as volunteers are expected to have.... Throughout the day the [trainer] told stories of various scams committed by inmates ... the stories providing evidence of why we were to distrust the inmates."

The mistrust instilled in Erica manifested during her second visit to the prison. She described her feelings about an incident in which a female prisoner blew her a kiss:

"Normally I wouldn't think anything of it. But the paranoia that is instilled about prison politics was certainly there ... I hate that I have to be [wary] of this kind of thing. It borders on homophobia and fear, but I also have to set some very strong boundaries."

Erica did not want to distrust this community, but this particular interaction made deconstructing biases extremely challenging. However, Erica committed herself to creating a realistic synthesis of what she was taught in her training and how she experienced the prison population:

“Although of course I cannot ignore the fact that I am going into a prison and that people have committed crimes, sometimes violent crimes, I cannot help to ask how much of this is self-fulfilling prophecy.... It is a tricky process to combat my fear about inmate populations, but also not be naïve or stupid about working with them.”

Throughout the interaction phase, Erica was able to make connections with many of the women she served, but was always cautious not to be taken advantage of. This realistic synthesis allowed Erica to combat biases while still being vigilant of her safety.

Researchers also dealt with societal biases about their chosen communities. Jennifer recalled an interaction she had with a female employee of a nursing home during a breakfast trip:

“The young woman who works for the nursing home turned to me and whispered, ‘I just wanted to let you know something.... I am going to sit with everyone until the food comes but then I am going to move to another table and eat by myself ... because I can't stand to watch those people eat. It makes me sick. Ya know what I mean?’”

Jennifer's interaction with this woman highlights the biases other people hold about people over the age of 65. Unfortunately, Jennifer was so shocked by this woman's comments that she was left speechless. During the evaluation phase Jennifer processed her feelings of anger pertaining to the biases older adults face. Furthermore, she made the connection between the bias she witnessed and how older adults in her life might have been treated: “I continually think back to elderly people who have been in my life, and I am horrified to think that they, too, have been treated poorly (and in essence, abusively).” Ultimately, Jennifer committed herself to challenge the biases of others when confronted with them in the future. For all three researchers, becoming aware of their biases and the biases of others created a desire to promote a more inclusive and accepting society, particularly for members of their chosen community.

Gender

The lived experience of cultural immersion for Elaine and Erica entailed contending with issues related to gender, which occurred during each phase of cultural immersion. Gender was not central to Jennifer's experience. However, given the major role gender played for Elaine and Erica, this theme was deemed vital to understanding the lived experience of cultural immersion. In this study, the theme of gender referred to incidences when researchers discussed how gender affected their overall immersion experience, when they expressed concerns about safety because of their gender, or when they experienced sexual harassment.

During the goal-setting phase, issues related to gender manifested for Elaine. She stated, “I was also quite concerned about my gender. I am a female entering a [male-dominated] homeless community, and I was going with the knowledge that there would probably be more men than women.... It made me feel quite uncomfortable.” She attempted to minimize her gender during the immersion by “trying not to appear attractive.” Despite this strategy, Elaine dealt with issues of gender during the interaction phase. She expressed frustration about how she felt she was viewed by the males after her first site visit:

“Being surrounded by males makes me feel more like a sex object than a graduate student.... How am I supposed to help men who are looking at me in such a sexual manner?... Being around so many men, men that I was extremely unsure about, made me feel a loss of power and confidence within myself.”

During the time period of her first few visits to the shelter, Elaine continually reflected on how her gender affected her participation in this cultural community. She grappled with issues related to her safety, not wanting to be sexualized, and feeling powerless. Fortunately, after her third visit, Elaine began to feel “unbelievably more comfortable being at the facility and also engaging with the men of the program and the people coming in.” Elaine attributed her increased level of comfort to the increase in female volunteers and to listening to the stories of some of the homeless men. She discussed how one man's story allowed her to experience his humanity, to feel a connection to the community, and simultaneously, to feel more comfortable serving the community: “I was not concerned about my feelings, or how I looked ... I was just listening and allowing a person to share their painful story with me, and that little bit made a difference. It made me WANT to return.” During the evaluation phase of the experience, Elaine had a realization: “I became more aware of my own insecurities about working with such a male-dominated population.” This statement does not invalidate the previous feelings and thoughts she had regarding her gender and her safety but highlights how her gender identity and worldview influenced her perception of homeless men as sexualizing her and as dangerous.

Erica also faced the issues related to gender while working with an all-female prison population. During her goal setting, Erica intentionally chose to volunteer with female inmates with the hope of sharing a common experience: “Yes, I would be working with inmates, people [convicted] of felony crimes, but the fact that they were women was at least something I felt I had in common with them.” Regardless of a shared gender, Erica encountered issues related to safety, power, and being sexualized during the interaction phase. On numerous occasions, Erica was the target of sexual harassment and physical intimidation by female inmates as well as the prison guards. Erica described an incident in which she was confronted by “cat calls” from a group of inmates: “All of these inmates were pouring out of the gym and lots of comments came pouring out with them. ‘Oooh she's cute’ and ‘Damn—who's that?’” Although Erica selected a female population hoping that gender would be a point of similarity, she dealt with issues of harassment. For Elaine and Erica, gender played a significant role in their immersion because their gender influenced their interactions with their chosen populations and caused them to explore how their gender affects their daily lives.

Barriers

Each of the researchers experienced barriers during their cultural immersion experiences. In this study, the theme of barriers refers to perceived internal barriers, such as procrastination and maintaining motivation, as well as perceived external barriers such as required trainings and background checks. These barriers occurred during the goal-setting and interaction phases.

For Elaine and Jennifer, internal barriers occurred during the goal-setting phase. Although Elaine and Jennifer were excited to begin their immersion experiences, this enthusiasm quickly faded. They both labeled their hesitation as procrastination, but their narratives revealed their internal barriers to include fear of self-awareness and unresolved personal issues.

During the goal-setting phase, Elaine discussed being excited about her immersion experience until it came time to make calls to identify a volunteer site:

“Simply making the commitment to call these different organizations was challenging and provoked anxiety.... I realized it was because once I committed myself to this population, within these organizations, I was committing myself to self-growth.”

Although self-growth is rewarding, it can be turbulent and anxiety provoking—making it daunting and leading some people to avoid it. Elaine ultimately made the choice to grow.

Jennifer discussed how she intended to get an early start on her volunteering, but it was not until a couple of months into the semester that she actually contacted a volunteer site:

“I had thought about calling probably two dozen or so times. I would get up in the morning and think about what I needed to do that day, and oftentimes I would remember that I needed to call the nursing home. Then I would look at the time and rationalize that it was too early or that they would probably be at lunch. If I thought about it later in the day it would seem too late to call.... Maybe I did not really want to do the project because I knew that it would force me to deal with parts of my life that I did not want to deal with, like missing my grandmother ... and grieving the loss of the relationships I had had with so many older adults when I was serving the church in my first career.”

Jennifer initially described her avoidance of starting the immersion experience as procrastination. Further reflection revealed to Jennifer that she was avoiding unresolved personal issues.

Unlike Elaine and Jennifer, Erica's internal barrier took the form of maintaining motivation to volunteer, which surfaced during the interaction phase:

“It's out of obligation and responsibility that I move from at times. To be honest, it is a little bit of a struggle each time I go. I always feel this sense of resistance, but after I go, I always am glad I did.”

Although Erica struggled with her motivation to continue volunteering, she realized she provided a valuable service. Erica described feeling rewarded for the services she offered and how this positive feeling aided her in persevering.

All three researchers also discovered external barriers to involving oneself with culturally diverse communities. These barriers came in the form of unreturned phone calls, interviews, immunizations, background checks, and mandatory trainings. During goal setting, Jennifer discussed her frustrations with beginning her immersion:

“But apparently one does not commit to volunteering and then show up the next day and volunteer ... I had to be interviewed. I had to have a background check. I had to have a TB [tuberculosis] skin test done. I had to have a flu shot ... I was annoyed by all of the hoops I felt like I had to jump through to do this.”

Elaine was equally frustrated with the barriers she faced in finding a homeless shelter that would allow her to volunteer:

“I thought I would make a couple of phone calls and find an organization that not only wanted my help but also was as anxious as I was to start.... I went through a process of contacting several agencies and not hearing back from them. It was frustrating.”

Jennifer and Elaine believed that the process of finding and securing a volunteer position would be “easy.” However, they soon realized they would not simply be “welcomed with open arms.” Rather, they would need to demonstrate their commitment to volunteering by making multiple phone calls, being interviewed, and having vaccinations.

Erica had to negotiate all of the aforementioned hurdles and then some. In order to volunteer, Erica had to first complete 8 hours of training. Furthermore, she faced security screenings each time she went to volunteer, and she was forced to deal with security guards who scrutinized her dress, her use of music, and the yoga practices she shared with the inmates. Erica described some of the actions taken by the security guards during one of her classes:

“Did I mention that I think the guards are the worst.... The guards (all men) got over the intercom and started breathing heavy into the microphone.... They would also say random sayings in high-pitched voices over the intercom like ‘I’ve already done that before.’”

Like Jennifer and Elaine, Erica was not dissuaded by the barriers she faced. Although annoyed, she persisted in volunteering. Alas, the negotiation of internal and external barriers was central to the lived experience of cultural immersion.

Self-Awareness

In this study, the theme of self-awareness refers to personal insights the researchers described in their narratives. Although self-awareness occurred in each phase of the experience, the greatest learning seemed to occur during the evaluation phase, which is the focus of this section. For Erica, her gained self-awareness pertained to her need to prove herself:

“Where does this need to prove myself come from? Is it because I fear my own inadequacies? I have such a strong reaction to what I see as social injustice ... but I do question this reoccurring theme of wanting to prove myself.... I think I have often found myself in the position of being the only one defending social justice movements and perhaps that is the stem of this [need to prove myself].”

Throughout the immersion experience, Erica discussed her reoccurring need to prove herself. However, in the evaluation phase, she connected her need to prove herself with a desire to be an advocate for social justice.

Elaine reflected on how the immersion experience allowed her to connect with members of the homeless population and how this helped to dissipate some of the fears and preoccupations she originally held:

“I went from feelings of fear and anxiety when I began the project to being angered and saddened by the injustices and stories that I found while there ... I became less concerned with my story and more enthralled with the stories of others. I wanted to know more about the people I met, the ones I served and came into brief contact with.”

Because of her immersion experience, Elaine learned about her biases, faced her fears, and became less self-absorbed. Through the stories of the homeless men she met, Elaine gained knowledge about the homeless community, particularly the challenges they face.

Although Jennifer did not initially have a desire to be personally challenged by her immersion, she became more aware of certain aspects of her life during the evaluation phase:

“I think it is interesting I chose a group to volunteer with that I believed I would not be challenged by. In the end, it is clear that I have been challenged from a number of angles: my reluctance to make the phone call to begin my work ... the social justice issues of elderly people, and my personal struggle with my grandma's recent passing. I do think that this project has been, in my experience, for my educational good but also for my own personal edification. It has helped me to really look at some areas of my life that I have either been unwilling to deal with or did not know that I needed to deal with.”

Jennifer's immersion experience gave her insight into the lives of people over age 65, and it also aided in increasing her self-awareness about her personal values and her unresolved issues.

Discussion

This study provides insight into the lived experience of cultural immersion for three graduate students. Additionally, the results of this study support earlier research outcomes regarding immersion experiences. Consistent with the findings of Alexander et al. (2005), Canfield et al. (2009), Ishii et al. (2009), and Tomlinson-Clarke and Clarke (2010), researchers in this study experienced increased self-awareness and improved understanding of diverse communities, evidenced in the themes of bias and self-awareness.

In this study, the increased awareness of bias and self-awareness experienced by the researchers was aided by self-reflection. Authors (Alexander et al., 2005; Pope-Davis et al., 1997; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010) have theorized that self-reflection aids learning during cultural immersion experiences. Although the role of self-reflection in promoting student growth was not directly assessed, it appears that the researchers' self-reflections supported learning. For Elaine and Jennifer, self-reflection aided in identifying the root causes of their “procrastination” in starting their immersion experiences. For Elaine and Erica, self-reflection aided in identifying personal biases. In these examples, self-reflection facilitated learning associated with cultural immersion—particularly in the themes of bias and self-awareness.

Like DeRicco and Sciarra (2005), researchers in this study also experienced barriers during cultural immersion. Similar to DeRicco and Sciarra, the cultural immersion experience caused Elaine to uncover fears and to realize how self-absorption created a barrier to interaction. Unlike the findings of DeRicco and Sciarra, the researchers in this study did not discuss White privilege as a barrier during immersion.

The researchers in this study chose communities that differed from their own based on age, socioeconomic status, and incarceration; therefore, they did not focus on issues of race such as White privilege.

A factor that aided the researchers in overcoming barriers during cultural immersion was the sustained, meaningful, and interpersonal contact researchers had with their chosen communities. Authors (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Ishii et al., 2009; Pope-Davis et al., 1997) have hypothesized that cultural immersion experiences are most effective when they require multiple contacts with a cultural community. Although the impact of multiple contacts was not directly assessed in this study, the findings of this study support the notion that multiple contacts aid learning during cultural immersion. Elaine's and Erica's initial volunteer experiences were largely negative. In both cases, a single encounter with their communities would have reinforced biases instead of alleviating them. Multiple contacts allowed Elaine and Erica to feel more comfortable at their volunteer sites and facilitated positive interpersonal contact.

Meaningful interactions with a cultural community are also thought to facilitate learning during a cultural immersion experience (Canfield et al., 2009; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). Although the criteria for meaningful interactions is unclear, when the researchers in this study made personal connections with community members, they were able to overcome biases and were more willing to challenge barriers. For Elaine, hearing the stories of homeless men helped her overcome biases. For Jennifer, connecting the discrimination she witnessed with the experiences of older people in her life inspired her to challenge ageism. Although the impact of meaningful interactions was not directly assessed, it is apparent that meaningful contacts aided the researchers in overcoming biases and challenging barriers.

Implications

The findings of this study provide tentative implications for the implementation of cultural immersion experiences. The findings provide students, counselors, and counselor educators with a framework to understand the lived experience of cultural immersion. By understanding the experiences students may potentially face during a cultural immersion experience, educators can help prepare students and provide them with supports to facilitate their learning. For example, counselor educators may want to encourage students to get an early start on their immersion experience. As it was noted in the findings of this study, the researchers experienced various barriers, such as trainings and medical testing, which delayed the initiation of volunteering. Starting the volunteer experience early in the semester can compensate for potential delays due to external barriers.

Counselor educators are encouraged to prepare for and to support students who face challenges associated with internal barriers. At various points in the immersion experience, researchers discussed issues related to motivation, such as procrastinating or maintaining motivation. Each of the researchers in this study discussed how being graded was often sufficient motivation to continue. Therefore, the instructor may want to periodically remind students of assignment due dates. Erica and Elaine also discussed how feeling they had something to offer the community served as motivation. To maintain student motivation, counselor educators may also periodically offer praise to their students for their efforts.

Concerns related to gender need to be considered by students and counselor educators. Although the goal of immersion projects are to challenge biases, this cannot be done at the expense of personal safety. In this study, both Elaine and Erica experienced incidences of sexual harassment and were concerned for their safety. As counselor educators, we must be cautious before approving cultural immersion experiences that might put students' safety at risk. It is equally important for students to stay vigilant of their own safety. It is advised that students work through recognized organizations to provide their volunteer services.

During the immersion experience, students are likely to uncover biases and experience self-awareness. By reading the accounts of the researchers in this study, students can gain a realistic understanding of what they are likely to encounter during immersion, specifically, preparing them for the biases they may face. As previously discussed, it appears that sustained, meaningful, cross-cultural interaction promotes bias reduction. Therefore, it may be wise for counselors and students who plan to engage in cultural immersion experiences to have multiple significant contacts with their chosen cultural community. Counselor educators can facilitate this by requiring students to have multiple contacts as part of a cultural immersion experience; we recommend a minimum of 10 contact hours.

In this study, researchers discussed how they experienced growth in self-awareness through their cultural immersion. It also seemed that having opportunities for self-reflection aided in the development of self-awareness. Thus, a mechanism for reflection, such as the use of reflection journals, should be incorporated into immersion experiences (Pope-Davis et al., 1997).

Limitations

There are two major limitations associated with this study: the participants and the research method. The participants in this study were three White, 29- to 30-year-old women. This homogenous sample did not allow the researchers to examine if differences in experience existed for students based on gender, race/ethnicity, or age. The research method implemented in this study also carries limitations. Because the researchers were the participants and did not use pseudonyms, biased interpretations and social desirability might have been present in the data and analyses. Additionally, because the participants were students of the first author, they may have been inclined to highlight the learning that occurred for them in their narratives.

Conclusion

Understanding clients from a humanistic perspective requires delving into their phenomenological view of the world (Hazler, 2001). The ability to understand the perspectives of diverse communities can often be a challenge for counselors who lack experience working with these communities (Canfield et al., 2009). Cultural immersion experiences are recommended as a way to gain insight to the lives of diverse communities (Canfield et al., 2009; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010) and improve counselors' ability to empathize with culturally different clients (Pope-Davis et al., 1997). Prior to this study, little was known about the elements of the immersion experience that facilitate growth in counselors' ability to work with diverse populations. The findings of this study provide a framework for understanding the lived experience of cultural immersion and how immersion experiences promote the examination of biases, gender, barriers, and the self. Although additional research is necessary to validate the conclusions of this study, it is evident that cultural immersion experiences provide

counseling students with a holistic and humanistic understanding of themselves and of diverse communities.

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