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Choosing to be Involved

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6

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Commentary: Kevin Cokley

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Like many people from Madison, Wisconsin, being white was a part of my identity that I did not have to reflect upon in my youth. My hometown was predominantly white, and I simply do not recall contemplating the meaning of my race or ethnicity during my childhood. That I was male, artistic, bookish, and from a working, middle-class family—these were the critical components of my identity then. Being white? Not at all. Although I occasionally interacted with peers who were ethnically and racially different from me, these experiences were often at cross-town sporting events and involved little social interaction. I was certainly aware that there were racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, but as a youth the existence of these differences had little bearing on my day-to-day life.

Much has changed since my youth, and my current views about multiculturalism, social justice, and my own cultural identity have evolved because of the challenges I have encountered and pursued throughout my life and career. I wish I could tell readers that I faced challenges regarding cultural diversity with intentionality, but in all honesty, I have stumbled into some experiences with cultural diversity by happenstance, and into others as a consequence of my own errors. Following, I share some influential moments that have altered my worldview and cultural identity, but it is likely that most of these changes evolved over time and quite subtly. More often than not, these changes occurred because a few people respected, cared, and stood by me as I struggled to understand and grow. After discussing some events crucial to my cultural identity development, I consider how these experiences influenced my career and offer some thoughts about multicultural concerns and social justice advocacy in counseling.

Cultural Identity Development

Although I did not consciously consider my race and ethnicity as a youth, there were a number of influences that helped form my early beliefs. As indicated previously, I am a product of Madison, Wisconsin, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and I was influenced by the liberal political and social ideals of the community. I was fascinated by university students and community members who actively stood up for their beliefs regarding the Vietnam War and other important political and social concerns, such as civil rights and equality for women. Older brothers and sisters of friends offered glimpses into this world, sharing their beliefs and activities. A few teachers also actively expressed their beliefs and values, and they regularly participated in the anti-war demonstrations that occurred on downtown Madison streets. At least a few of these teachers were taken out of my school in handcuffs; one teacher had been a favorite. These individuals were the role models of my youth, and they left a strong impression regarding social justice issues. They volunteered for organizations that advocated for social justice, and they spoke openly about their anti-war stances and civil and equal rights beliefs. Although I was too young to be involved, I absorbed and grew to admire their conviction. They also taught me to be concerned about social concerns and change and to believe that one person could make a difference. My interest in multicultural counseling and social justice emerged from these early experiences, and in the following I discuss some of the significant changes that occurred as I became a young adult and later a professional.

Racist Beliefs

Confronting my racist beliefs started with a derogatory comment I made when I was a sophomore in college, over 30 years ago. I used the slur in a conversation with a close friend, Rob. I admired Rob and felt fortunate to have him as a friend. Although I do not remember the specific slur, I remember Rob's response quite vividly. He said, "Do you really believe that? You know that term is racist." I do not recall a time prior to that moment where someone had insinuated that I was racist. Furthermore, by that time, I felt somewhat educated about racism and firmly believed in racial equality. I was shocked, and I tried to dismiss Rob's confrontation and the situation. In response, Rob challenged me to think through the premise of the slur. I recall arguing with him for a while, and I held strongly to my position that the slur was just a meaningless term. Rob persisted in asking about the beliefs behind the slur, but I resisted his challenges and held strongly to my belief that I had only used a meaningless term. He eventually walked away, telling me how disappointed he felt at that moment.

This exchange haunted me. At first I could not understand Rob's reaction, and I was offended that he had essentially called me a racist. I believed in equality and felt this belief was an indication that I was not a racist. The notion that someone could believe in equality and still hold racist beliefs seemed impossible at that time. Nonetheless, I ruminated on the exchange and the implications of Rob's challenge. At first I was angry and hurt. Initially, I would not talk to Rob, and I had a hard time looking at him. However, Rob and I lived and worked together, so talking of the conflict between us was inevitable. As I contemplated the term I used and Rob's challenge to think through the premise of the comment, my position began to soften and I came to realize the term was hurtful. I felt confused by the use of

racial slurs by others around me, and the relative ease with which others used these words. Despite my initial misgivings and eventual confusion, I approached Rob and apologized. Initially, I apologized for the conflict between us and not for the racial slur. I recall telling him that I did not believe I was a racist, and I failed to understand his perspective.

Rob was surprisingly mature and patient with me in discussing his concerns. We discussed the slur and his reactions, and eventually he helped me deconstruct the premise of the term. Learning how to deconstruct the beliefs behind the slur became a powerful tool for me. I was shocked at how naïve and wrong I had been. As we talked, I expressed my embarrassment over the situation. Unexpectedly, Rob said he felt the same way when he first confronted his own biases, and he encouraged me to let go of those feelings and focus on making a change. We practiced deconstructing the beliefs of other slurs and racial jokes we had heard, and I began to see the hurtful nature of the slurs and jokes. Eventually, Rob showed me how racist beliefs could permeate news reports, television, and other media. These experiences were revelations to me, forever changing my views of social interactions on mass media.

I consider this event a turning point in my life. Having the ability to deconstruct an event and identify the beliefs behind the event is a skill that I continue to use today. This ability has helped me to examine many of my beliefs about cultural concerns, values, and diversity (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender, gender equity, impact of poverty) that I may have otherwise ignored. Although I continued to struggle at times with beliefs that could be construed as racist as a young adult, I no longer accepted those beliefs without thinking through the situation. As I matured, I came to realize the insidiousness of racist beliefs; and the unforeseen ways these beliefs can affect us if left unchallenged. Rob's confrontation resulted in an awakening for me that was likely heightened by the fact that he was also white. I had never had a model for confronting my own underlying racist beliefs, but here a close friend, who was white and just a few years older than I, had modeled how to confront and think through my prejudice. The process was eased by my admiration for Rob and my desire to emulate him. In retrospect, I am not sure that I would have embraced or sought the other multicultural experiences that came later in life without Rob's initial confrontation, support, and guidance. Confronting and coming to terms with my racist beliefs prepared me for the next critical challenge of learning how to be interpersonally involved with culturally diverse groups.

Getting Involved

My interest in cultural issues in counseling grew during my master's program at Penn State, although the next critical event occurred during my first professional position as a Residence Hall Director at Illinois State University (ISU). While interviewing for this position, I was impressed with the residence life staff's strong commitment to cultural diversity. The entire staff discussed their interest and commitment to cultural diversity, and they voiced the importance of having a staff that was similarly committed to and representative of cultural diversity on campus. Once hired, I found that cultural and diversity topics were an important and valued aspect of our weekly professional development trainings, with seminars often focused on the provision of culturally sensitive services. Additionally, I had my

first cross-cultural supervision experience with Ken, who was African American and my supervisor. Although we had many personal interests in common, I connected with him around our interest in counseling and cross-cultural concerns.

Although I could share several stories about my experiences with Ken, one experience was particularly powerful, and a transition point in my personal and professional life. During my first year at ISU, I was assigned as an advisor to the Black Awareness and Action Committee (BAAC). This organization was open to all students, although the group was primarily comprised of African American students. I was one-half of a "salt and pepper" BAAC advising team for our complex. My advising partner, Shirl, was African American, and she was an experienced residence life professional.

BAAC was my first advising experience, and during the initial two months of the semester I was having difficulty connecting with the students in the group. These meetings were a new experience for me, for it was the first time where I was racially in the minority. When we met, the room was loud, meetings seemed disorganized, and students often interrupted each other and seemed confrontational. When confrontations occurred, I had a difficult time discerning whether or not students were genuinely angry. I found the meetings overwhelming, disorientating, and intimidating, and I began to regret the advising assignment. Increasingly, I felt distant and ineffective during the meetings, and I suspected that students perceived me as being uncomfortable, aloof, and uninterested. Shirl and I often debriefed after the meetings, but I felt awkward discussing my feelings with her. I could see that Shirl was working effectively with the group, and I felt embarrassed that I was not interacting or being effective as an advisor.

I was concerned, and I knew early in my interactions during BAAC meetings that the situation had to change. I tried to take responsibility for what was happening, so, being an introvert, I turned to reading. I read articles and books on African American culture, communication style, and racism. I truly believed that I could find the answers in those readings, but I found none. My behavior did not change, the problems persisted, and I felt increasingly isolated from the group. I rapidly began to look for reasons and excuses not to attend BAAC meetings.

During a supervision session, Ken asked how my advising was progressing with BAAC. I was reluctant to offer information and felt guarded. I quietly wondered how to tell my African American supervisor that I was not comfortable in the room with a group of African American students. I grew increasingly uncomfortable in the room with Ken, as he patiently waited for my response. Ken broke the silence, asked if I felt lost with the BAAC group, and wondered if I had ever been in a room with a large group of African Americans in my life. Although I was surprised by his questions, I admitted that I had not had that experience. Ken empathized with my position, and said, "Alan, if I was in your shoes, I would feel lost too. Why don't we talk about what you are doing, and what you might need to change to feel more confident and comfortable with the group?" Ken and I talked for a couple of hours about the history of BAAC, African American communication styles, and the role of advising in the group. We also talked about my background and limited experience with cultural diversity, the role of the advisor, and what I wanted to learn from being involved with BAAC. As we talked, I began to understand that I was imposing my expectations about communication onto the group, and the students in the group and my communication styles were culturally quite different. My lack of understanding of these cultural dynamics rapidly became apparent, and the discussion and resulting awareness were transformative. In

addition to helping me understand the communication styles in the group, Ken considered my experiences and helped me reconsider how to approach the group. I felt understood, not judged, and was motivated and excited to act.

During this supervision session, Ken and I also focused on my role as an advisor. I had picked up the belief during my counseling training that I needed to maintain some “professional distance” in my work with clients, a belief that I later realized was steeped in westernized notions of client care. While Ken had also trained as a counselor and understood this belief, he challenged me in three important ways. First, he asked me to consider what maintaining appropriate professional distance meant, whom that belief served best, and if this belief were useful in forming relationships with BAAC members. Second, he asked if maintaining professional distance was working for me. We examined the idea of maintaining professional distance, and I had to admit this approach had not worked at all in my advising with BAAC. Ken’s final challenge to me was to get involved. He encouraged me not to maintain distance and indicated the students in BAAC would only see me as uninterested, unaring, and perhaps even concerned that I harbored racial prejudice. I had not considered the idea that I could potentially be perceived as biased, and I was shocked that I had never considered this perspective.

Ken and I also had one final discussion during this extended supervision session. At the end of the session, I was feeling very relieved, hopeful, and strongly connected to Ken. I felt that I could talk to him about anything, so I asked Ken if he thought I was a racist. Ken looked at me in a measured way and indicated that it was his belief that we all hold prejudicial beliefs. Furthermore, it was not whether I held racist beliefs, but what I intended to do about those beliefs. Would I hide them or ignore them, or would I acknowledge them, work to be aware of their effect on relationships, take responsibility when I made errors based on my prejudiced beliefs, and open myself to learning about people who were racially different? He concluded by saying he believed that I was of the latter type—that I wanted to learn, and he liked that about me. After our discussion, I felt a burden had been lifted and if I worked toward understanding and engaging multiculturalism, I was moving in the right direction.

This supervision session with Ken propelled me into action, and he and I identified several goals that I pursued over the next several weeks. First, I went to Shirl and apologized for my lack of involvement with BAAC and shared my struggles over the previous months. Shirl indicated some appreciation for my honesty about my struggles and expressed feeling excited that she was going to have an advising partner. Second, I began meeting individually with the leadership of BAAC to provide support and mentoring as leaders. My goal was to develop stronger interpersonal relationships in the organization, and I sought to start this process with student leaders. Third, I went to and participated in every BAAC event, working on the homecoming float, attending the socials, and finally, when invited, I went to students’ homes to meet their parents and families. Overall, my goals were to reduce the interpersonal distance and increase my involvement.

In retrospect, Ken and my subsequent experiences with BAAC transformed my cultural identity and worldview in four important respects. First, this experience was the first time that I was truly in a culturally diverse setting, and although I was exposed to some cultural diversity during my Penn State experiences, Ken helped me to see that the experience with BAAC was entirely different. I was not in the cultural majority, and students were not trying to enter my world; rather, I was trying to enter their world. As such, I no longer had the privilege of remaining encapsulated in the cultural norms and communication style I had

grown up with and taken for granted. If I were to have success with BAAC, I would have to learn to culturally adapt. This first lesson about encapsulation was essential to helping alter my interpersonal interactions and role with BAAC. Additionally, I had to come to terms with being in a cultural setting that was unfamiliar and learn to manage the anxiety that I felt when the interpersonal dynamics were unfamiliar. I realized the importance of being patient and interpersonally flexible in how I communicated with others, and learned to embrace these new learning opportunities.

Besides learning that my communication skills were ineffective, my second lesson had to do with my attitudes about helping that rendered me ineffective as an advisor. Specifically, the idea about maintaining a professional distance in my work had not been useful in forming positive relationships with BAAC members. BAAC students needed to know me to trust me, so I shared more of my life with students. While continuing to mentor students, I now refused to hide behind a professional demeanor. The idea of forming genuine relationships with the members of BAAC came into focus, and I began to look for methods of reducing the distance between myself and students.

The third lesson involved taking Ken's advice and getting involved, immersing myself in BAAC and the activities of the group. As noted above, this helped me gain new interpersonal skills, adapt my interpersonal skills to new cultural settings, and address and understand the emotions of being in unfamiliar cultural territory. This idea of getting involved continues to affect me strongly today, for I believe that you cannot become culturally competent unless you are immersed in the community you serve and open to what you will learn. As a teacher, I can guide students to articles, books, and films, but I think it is essential for people to make choices to be part of culturally diverse settings—perhaps particularly Whites, who can more easily remain in settings in which they remain in the majority. This approach is essential to learning about cultural norms and values, and to the growth and development of one's cultural identity.

Finally, Ken taught me to not let fear paralyze me. Although I had not been willing to admit my feelings early in my work with BAAC, I came to realize that I was not involved in part because I was afraid of acting or saying something racist. This fear was paralyzing, and this feeling contributed to my unwillingness to become involved. Keeping distance was thus protective. In this sense, I could be safe and not make a mistake. As a supervisor and friend, Ken helped me understand that everyone struggles with some prejudices, but we are more often defined by what we do than by our beliefs alone. Additionally, he showed me that by maintaining distance, I was acting like a racist whether it was intentional or not. This realization was a rather rude awakening for me. Ken was able to convey this information in a way that did not cause me to retreat, but rather our discussions helped propel me forward and into action. These initial lessons also provided an important foundation for the next important cultural lessons in my life.

Understanding Cultural Values in Counseling

The next stop in my personal and professional trek was a move to New York City. My wife and I lived in a brownstone in Brooklyn located in an ethnically and racially diverse neighborhood. We could hear Caribbean music from our back window, Reverend Al Sharpton lived

immediately behind us, and across from us was a tenement building that served as housing for predominantly Italian and Latina/o families. Much of our neighborhood was comprised of working-class African American families, and we called Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, home for several years. We were literally immersed in cultural diversity. It was during this part of our lives that I entered the doctoral program in counseling psychology at Fordham University, where Joe Ponterotto became my advisor.

Concurrently with my doctoral program, I worked as a school counselor for New York City public schools, with adolescents and young adults in the five boroughs, and with children in foster care. My role was to address the academic, career, and personal/social needs of the adolescents in our programs. Many of the adolescents lived in Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. Most adolescents in our program were African American or Latina/o, although we also had a large Unaccompanied Adolescent Refugee Program that provided services to a number of internationally born adolescents and young adults. Initially, the majority of the students were from Southeast Asia (i.e., Amerasians, Cambodians, Hmong, Laotians, Vietnamese), while in later years I worked with adolescents and young adults from China, Haiti, Albania, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. In many ways, I was in a cross-cultural laboratory, and it was in this setting that I began to understand value systems and how steeped these systems are in our cultural backgrounds. Although I had learned to adapt to some cultural communication differences through my prior experiences with BAAC, it was here that I learned to understand and intentionally adapt my counseling skills to multiple cultural value systems.

Although there are many such experiences I could share, I will offer a couple of examples that taught me important lessons about cultural values and clinical practice. One of the most important experiences came in the form of a service delivery problem. The prior counselor who held my position had struggled to meet with and provide services to the Southeast Asian students in our program. My supervisor indicated there were slightly over 150 adolescents in the program, and my predecessor had met with about 10 of these students over the previous 2 years. She indicated the main complaint was that “these clients do not show up for appointments,” and she had no other explanation for why my predecessor had been so unsuccessful in providing services to this group of adolescents and their foster care families. I had no immediate answers, so I consulted with staff to determine what might be happening with regard to the missed appointments. Secretaries indeed confirmed that many appointments had been made, but often the adolescents from Southeast Asia did not show up for the appointment and offered no explanation for missing them. Some staff told me these students were very disrespectful, as reflected in their failure to keep appointments, but at that point, I had already met some of these adolescents and knew them to be respectful. Although I also had the experience of setting up a few appointments at student requests, only to see them not show up for the arranged meeting, I knew the adolescents wanted help.

To explore the issue, I turned to literature about the Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese cultures. The idea of cultural values emerged in these readings, specifically the notion that time was not seen in a linear fashion in many Asian cultures. In fact, time was understood within the context of relationships. This concept made little sense to me, and consequently I consulted with some local experts on the Southeast Asian culture. I was able to speak with the staff at St. Rita’s in the Bronx, which provided an outreach center for the Vietnamese community. They helped me understand that an important priority in

Vietnamese culture is family, and that any family commitment took precedence over any appointments outside the family system. In fact, if there were a family concern, the individual would address this issue first and then go to the appointment, even if it meant showing for the appointment hours later. This information was consistent with my readings on individualistic versus collectivistic cultural values.

The Vietnamese cultural values regarding time quickly came into focus. I realized these differing cultural values regarding time were affecting scheduled appointments, and that my and the agencies' more individualistic value systems were coming into conflict with the collectivistic value systems of Southeast Asia. These cultural values were shaping expectations about how people would treat time, and behavior became a manifestation of these values and expectations. Additionally, Peggy McIntosh's (1998) chapter on white privilege took on new meaning for me. I could see how my dominant cultural assumptions about time had been imposed upon my students. Initially, this confluence of privilege and divergent cultural values made it difficult to see the conflict in value systems, but once aware, I realized I needed to become more culturally centered in my counseling approach to be accessible and effective.

Equipped with a new cultural framework, I changed the way that I offered services to all adolescents in the agency. First, I continued to offer individual appointments if requested, but I also established walk-in hours three days a week. The agency had two nights a week where they were open during early evening hours, and I set my walk-in hours to coincide. I also established some ground rules for services; for instance, I would see every student who came but I would see some in groups and some individually. Finally, I often scheduled follow-up individual appointments, but as much as possible I would arrange to see these students at school during established hours. This change to walk-in hours became a huge success. It took a few months to establish, but within three months I was seeing about 75 clients a month and, after a year, about a 100 clients a month through walk-in. I also met with over 90% of the Southeast Asian students in the first year that I made this change, whereas my predecessor had only met with 10 Southeast Asian students in 2 years. Additionally, word spread, and often my students arrived with siblings, cousins, and friends who also needed assistance, so I extended my services to include these individuals as well. This newfound understanding of cultural values and individualistic and collectivist worldviews was empowering, and I began to understand how to shape counseling services to be more culturally responsive. This awareness and change prepared me for the next critical lesson in social justice advocacy.

Emergence of Social Justice Advocacy

As student contact increased, I continued to learn how cultural values affected counseling, and I grew in my ability to provide culturally responsive counseling services. For example, I learned about gender issues when working with traditional Southeast Asian women and their families, and the importance of requesting that a family member be present for individual counseling sessions (i.e., it was not appropriate for a male counselor to meet with an unmarried female student). Gift-giving was also important in the Vietnamese culture, so I began to graciously accept the small gifts of food from students rather than

rejecting them. I also noticed similar changes in my counseling approach with students of Latina/o and African American heritage. With these changes and the significant level of student contact, I became increasingly aware of the struggles that my students faced in every aspect of their lives. They faced discrimination in many ways. For example, they were mistreated by teachers, were commonly labeled as and tracked into special education, were unable to access high achieving classes, had difficulty accessing supports to help them achieve academically, and experienced prejudice when applying for jobs or training programs. They rarely had family available to advocate for them when problems occurred, and rarely did my students understand the academic and career systems they were seeking to navigate. As an illustration, when applying for post-secondary education opportunities, my students did not understand how to complete a college application, file for financial aid, or understand the minimal requirements for entrance into college. Also, they were often discouraged from aspiring to or applying to attend college, or any other type of post-secondary education by the educational professionals in their schools. In fact, at the start of my employment with this agency, there were only a handful of students who were attending any post-secondary education institutions.

To combat these problems, I felt that advocacy was essential and that I needed to help empower my students to succeed at post-secondary levels. They needed more accurate information on how to navigate educational institutions and more effective academic and career planning. Initially, I established educational and career plans for every adolescent in my care through individual counseling sessions. I helped students identify their academic and career goals, establish academic plans to meet those goals, and followed up regularly in groups and individually to ensure they were on target academically. During my evening walk-in sessions, I regularly offered assistance in applying to college, completing financial aid applications, and preparing themselves for post-secondary education opportunities. In schools, I connected students to tutors and homework support, taught study skills, and advocated during Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) for the most rigorous academic programs possible (a high percentage of our students had learning disabilities). New York also had several after-school programs (i.e., tutoring, homework assistance, career and academic information services) available in the community, and I connected students to these additional resources to support their academic success. The number of students completing high school or GEDs rapidly increased during this time. Additionally, the number of students applying to and getting into post-secondary institutions began to grow as well (i.e., 60% of eligible students by the second year), and once on campus I helped students gain access to campus supports (e.g., Equal Opportunity Programs) to ensure their continued academic success. The students from our program were fairly successful on campus, and we were able to maintain a relatively high retention and graduation rate.

Although *social justice* was not a part of my professional vocabulary in the early 1990s, I now recognize these advocacy experiences as the emergence of my social justice practices. By providing more culturally responsive counseling, I opened myself to hearing the challenges and discrimination that my students experienced daily. Recognizing these concerns, I sought to provide services that would empower students, but I also chose to be directly involved in advocacy efforts. I helped students fight for access and opportunity, and I learned that advocacy was an essential skill to have as a counselor to help students address systemic barriers and discrimination.

Implications of Cultural Identity

These preceding events helped to shape my cultural identity and the subsequent choices I have made in my career and personal life. In the following sections, I offer my definition of multiculturalism, address the implications of my cultural identity professionally and personally, and discuss a few current struggles with regard to cultural issues. Finally, I offer some suggestions about resources for trainees and a few concluding thoughts.

Definition of Multiculturalism

As my prior experiences have shaped my cultural identity, so too have they affected my definition of multiculturalism. Admittedly, my definition of multiculturalism is a work in progress, and it is not the inclusive view that many assert. I do not have a formal definition of multiculturalism that I regard as essential or my own. Rather, I see myself as having a rather loose set of constructs that are associated and important to understanding culture. I also consider multiculturalism and diversity as separate but related ideas. With regard to multiculturalism, I focus on ethnicity and race, and particularly the psychological meaning of these constructs to the individual. I have been influenced by the writings of William Cross (1971, 1991, 1995) and Janet Helms (1990, 1995; Helms & Richardson, 1997), which emphasize the importance and meaning that we make of our ethnicity or race. In working with clients, I typically inquire about their perceptions of their ethnic and racial backgrounds, and how these perceptions and heritage have influenced their lives. In working with clients of color, I listen for and typically ask directly about experiences that felt oppressive or discriminatory. I use the term diversity for other aspects of difference (i.e., age, gender, abilities-disabilities, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation) that are not necessarily cultural (i.e., acculturation, ethnicity, language, race) but that may influence how we perceive our cultural heritage in important ways. In some cases, as with sexual orientation, this aspect of diversity may have more relevance in a client's life than culture. In working with a client, I seek to understand how each aspect of diversity may modify or influence the meaning of his or her race or ethnicity (e.g., a bisexual South Asian male will probably have different concerns than a paralyzed South Asian male).

Professional Implications

These prior cultural learning experiences have also altered my professional work. In particular, I deeply cared about the students that I had an opportunity to serve in New York schools. I saw the barriers of discrimination and prejudice my students contended with on a daily basis, but what emerged for me was a sense of admiration for their perseverance and resiliency. When I consider my professional career, my hope is to honor what I learned with and from my former students by looking for ways to continue to be aware of constantly changing multicultural issues, and by making choices to be involved in multicultural and diverse communities. As a staff psychologist in a university counseling center, I served as a liaison to the Multicultural Student Center on campus, providing outreach and consultation,

and served as a primary contact for student referrals and counseling. While there, I also focused on diversity concerns, specifically working closely with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Questioning (LGBTQ) community on campus. This work focused on providing training for peer counselors who staffed a telephone helpline for the LGBTQ community, offered educational programming in the community and campus, and social events for organizational members. In these ways and others, I sought to integrate multiculturalism and diversity into many aspects of my clinical and professional work.

Although I found clinical work rewarding, I intentionally transitioned to a faculty position at Marquette University to pursue my interests in teaching and research. Teaching affords me the opportunity to introduce and help students learn about multicultural issues, but research satisfies my curiosity about multicultural counseling and supervision. Here again, my experiences as a clinician in culturally diverse settings drive my research interests, and as such, I remain very committed to improving culturally responsive clinical practices for clients and supervisees. In large part, I have seen how limited and destructive culturally unresponsive practices are for clients and supervisees, and I want to improve our understanding of and practice of culturally relevant and responsive counseling and supervision to improve service delivery. As Pedersen (1995) suggests, culturally responsive practices have become a moral and ethical obligation. As such, I hope to inform the mental health field and encourage practitioners to be culturally responsive, and to understand what these practices look like during clinical practice.

Continuing Cultural Struggles

Although the critical experiences addressed in this chapter were important to my understanding of cultural concerns personally and professionally, I continue to address some important challenges. For example, as an instructor in Multicultural Counseling courses, I have increasingly become aware and curious about the fear and anxiety many students, particularly white students, feel when focusing on ethnicity and race in counseling. White and European American students often prefer that we address other aspects of diversity, rather than specifically focusing on ethnicity and race. Their discomfort is notable, and as instructors I think we often dilute our exploration of and ability to understand ethnicity and race by trying to provide a survey course that includes multiple dimensions of diversity (i.e., age, gender, abilities-disabilities, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation). I recognize that some students believe that racism or oppression no longer exists, and they voice this perspective in class, so I struggle with this aspect of multicultural training and how best to present these materials in a way that students are open and receptive to learning.

In addition to the challenges of teaching multicultural counseling, I have often carried the label "the Multicultural Guy." This label seems to make it easier for some people to dismiss and diminish my perspective. Although I expected resistance and challenges while encouraging others to become multiculturally aware and skilled, I have been a bit surprised by the level and intensity with which this resistance can be displayed. I can easily recall instances when workshop participants, students in classes, or professionals during meetings have been aggressive and expressed anger regarding my inclusive views. In one instance, I had been

advocating on a college campus for the LGBTQ community, after a gay student had been held down and had the word “Gay” carved into his chest. I was vocal on campus about this hate crime, and a reporter asked me if I was ever concerned about my own safety while advocating for the LGBTQ community. Honestly, I had never considered my safety until that moment, and I continue to be perplexed by these types of situations.

Although these are my current struggles, I recognize that I will likely continue to struggle to understand aspects of culture throughout my life. Cultures evolve and I want to make a point of staying educated; however, I expect that I will misunderstand a situation involving culture and potentially make an error in judgment or interaction. I try to approach these situations by accepting that these misunderstandings and mistakes will occur, admit to my role, and try to learn more about culture under such circumstances.

Resources, Recommendations, and Final Comments _____

Resources

Often people ask me what literature or other resources have been helpful in understanding myself culturally, and in developing my multicultural counseling skills. I suspect that many have read and already know of the preeminent writers on multicultural counseling theory, so I will briefly share some more personal resources. As a child and now as an adult, I learned from others’ stories and life experiences, so I often read biographies and autobiographies. Some of my favorites have been about Gandhi, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, and Amelia Earhart. These stories have taught me about perseverance, resolve, and commitment to one’s ideals, and they have been a great source of inspiration. I also enjoy Howard Zinn’s writings, particularly *A People’s History of the United States* (Zinn, 2003; this book is required reading in my multicultural counseling class). Derrick Bell (1987) has also been a favorite author. There are two films that I use regularly in training; *The Color of Fear* by Lee Mun Wah, and *Cold Water* by Noriko Ogami. I hope these resources are useful to readers.

Final Comments and Recommendations

Learning how others have faced and addressed their own multicultural challenges may be instructive through a book chapter; personally, I have found it very difficult to convey. The challenge for me is that reading was only marginally helpful, and I learned and grew best by doing. Being involved was my best resource, and it is my greatest recommendation to those who want to learn more about themselves culturally and become more culturally competent. These life lessons about culture are best taught through experience, and then most people need the opportunity to discuss the experiences, observations, and meaning with others in a safe and caring relationship. With these thoughts in mind, I make the following recommendations. First, take responsibility for your learning. Do not expect that others will guide you in learning about your cultural identity and multicultural counseling. It is likely that you will have to initiate and remain committed to this learning process. Second, expect that the learning process will take time. Most lasting changes take time to incorporate and fully understand, and learning about

your cultural identity is no different. Third, take some risks. I often find that students or trainees hide behind the fear of making mistakes or hurting someone. Frankly, if you as a student are going to learn about cultural issues and become more competent, you may make some mistakes. In my experience, most people appreciate those who try, and those who acknowledge and learn from their mistakes. Fourth, get involved, and put yourself in culturally diverse settings. Seek counseling practicum and internship experiences that have diverse cultural populations, ask supervisors how they address multicultural counseling during supervision and select those who are responsive, and look to integrate cultural perspectives in various aspects of your work. Finally, recognize that you cannot restrict the development of your cultural identity to your work life, but it has to also include your personal life.

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