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# Multicultural Training, Self-construals, and Multicultural Competence of School Counselors

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# MULTICULTURAL TRAINING, SELF-CONSTRUALS, AND MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Children of color currently comprise an increasingly large number of school-aged children in the United States. By the year 2020, the majority of school-aged children will consist of racial and ethnic minorities (Hodgkinson, 1985; Lee, 1995). The increasing ethnic and racial diversity of U.S. school systems mandates that school counselors possess appropriate levels of knowledge and skills to work with culturally diverse students (Durodoye, 1998; Hobson & Kanitz, 1996; Johnson, 1995). Multicultural counseling competence refers to counselors' attitudes/beliefs, knowledge, and skills in working with individuals from different cultural (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, social class, and sexual orientation) groups (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Sue et al., 1982; Sue et al., 1998). A paucity of information is available, however, regarding school counselors' competence in working with individuals representing diverse cultural groups.

Counselors who do not have sufficient training in cross-cultural counseling may lack the requisite skills to work with culturally diverse clients (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1996). In fact, previous studies (e.g., Pope-Davis, Reynolds, Dings, & Nielson, 1995; Pope-Davis, Reynolds, Dings, & Ottavi, 1994; Sodowsky, Kuo-Jackson, Richardson, & Corey, 1998) have found that certain training variables (e.g., taking academic coursework, attending workshops, receiving multicultural supervision) were significantly related to counselors' perceived competence in working with diverse populations. Because of the lack of multicultural counseling training in many school counseling programs (Hobson & Kanitz, 1996) and because of the documented role of prior multicultural training in predicting self-reported multicultural counseling competence, there is a need for research that examines the role of previous multicultural counseling training in school counselors' perceived multicultural counseling competence. Thus, the current study explored the extent to which prior academic training in multicultural counseling was predictive of school counselors' self-reported multicultural counseling competence.

Of additional interest in the present study was the role of various cultural self-conceptions in school counselors' perceived ability to work with culturally diverse populations. In particular, the effect of culture on the self is termed self-construal, which concerns how individuals perceive themselves. An interdependent self-construal is characterized by individuals' tendency to place value on connectedness to others, social context, and relationships. Conversely, individuals with independent self-construals base their self-definitions on their unique attributes and abilities and on the importance of distinguishing themselves from others (Cross & Madson, 1997; Singelis, 1994). A distinction that often emerges between members of Eastern and Western cultures is the degree to which the self is defined in relation to others (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999). For example, the United States is largely viewed as an individualistic (independent) society, whereas other cultures, particularly East Asian and African societies, have been characterized as

collectivistic (interdependent; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus, Mullaly, & Kitayama, 1997; Triandis, 1989).

Some researchers (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997), however, have suggested that an independent self-construal may not sufficiently describe the self-perceptions of U.S. women and individuals whose origins are non-Western. In fact, because relating to others and interdependence in relationships tend to describe features of female socialization patterns (Gilligan, 1982), many U.S. women are believed to emphasize more interdependent self-construals in comparison to their men counterparts. Because culture affects the development of both women and men's self-construals and their subsequent responses to others, it seems important that researchers examine potential links between these self-conceptions and other culturally related variables. In particular, there is a need for research that explores school counselors' self-perceptions in relation to their perceived ability to counsel culturally diverse individuals. Hence, the current investigation examined the role of interdependent and independent self-construals in school counselors' perceptions of their own multicultural counseling competence.

In sum, the purpose of the present investigation was to explore the role of prior academic training in multicultural counseling and interdependent and independent self-construals in predicting self-reported multicultural counseling competence in school counselors. This study is important for several reasons. First, examining the relationships among these variables may add to the scarce literature base in the area of multicultural counseling competence among school counselors. Second, the assessment of perceived multicultural counseling competence in school counselors may ultimately help them to better meet the mental health needs of the various cultural populations with whom they work. Third, data gleaned from this investigation may aid academic programs in school counseling to identify curricular and pedagogical issues that warrant attention with regard to preparing culturally competent school counselors.

One primary hypothesis guided our study. Specifically, we hypothesized that the number of previous multicultural counseling courses taken, interdependent self-construal, and independent self-construal would each account for a significant amount of the variance in school counselors' self-reported multicultural counseling competence.

### [Method Participants and Procedure](#)

The participants were a convenience sample of 156 school counselors from the greater New York City metropolitan area who attended a local school counseling conference. These counselors were asked to participate in an anonymous study examining counselors' general attitudes about culturally diverse clients. They were asked to complete a survey packet consisting of (a) the Cross-Cultural Counseling Competence Inventory-Revised (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Hernandez, 1991), (b) the Self-Construal Scale (Singelis, 1994), and (c) a brief demographic questionnaire. No incentives were used to solicit participation in the study, and participants were told that they would be provided with the study's results upon request.

Because of missing data, some demographic percentages do not equal 100. The 98 (62.8%) women and 57 (36.5%) men who participated in the study ranged in age from 24 to 70 years ( $M = 48.0$ ,  $SD = 9.7$ ), and their racial and ethnic breakdown was as follows: 129 (82.7%) White

Americans, 13 (8.3%) Black Americans, 12 (7.7%) Latino Americans, 1 (.6%) Asian American, and 1 (.6%) "Other." With regard to educational level, the participants consisted of 132 (84.6%) master's-degreed school counselors, 4 (2.6%) bachelor's-degreed school counselors, and 2 (1.3%) school counselors with doctoral degrees. By employment setting, 2 (1.3%) of the participants were working in an elementary school, 34 (21.8%) were employed in a junior high school, and 120 (76.9%) were working in a high school. The participants reported a mean of 15.7 years ( $SD = 8.8$ ; median = 15) of counseling experience, and 77.6% reported that they had taken at least one formal course related to multicultural or cross-cultural issues.

### Instruments

**Cross-Cultural Counseling Competence Inventory-Revised (CCCI-R).** The CCCI-R (LaFromboise et al., 1991) is a 20-item, 6-point Likert-type (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree) instrument designed for use by supervisors in assessing their trainees' cross-cultural counseling competence. This unifactor scale was developed based on the cross-cultural counseling competencies identified by the Education and Training Committee of Division 17 of the American Psychological Association (Sue et al., 1982). The CCCI-R consists of items that represent three areas: (a) cross-cultural counseling skill, (b) sociopolitical awareness, and (c) cultural sensitivity. Mean CCCI-R scores range 1 to 6, with higher scores indicating greater perceived multicultural counseling competence. The CCCI-R is reported to have good content, construct, and criterion-related validity (LaFromboise et al., 1991; Sabnani & Ponterotto, 1992).

The CCCI-R has been modified for self-report use in several studies (e.g., Constantine & Ladany, 2000; Ladany, Inman, Constantine, & Hofheinz, 1997). Thus, it was similarly adapted for such use in the present investigation, and all modifications to the items were within the advised limits suggested by the scale's authors (LaFromboise et al., 1991). A coefficient alpha of .95 was noted in the CCCI-R's validation sample (LaFromboise et al., 1991). In the present investigation, a Cronbach's alpha of .89 was computed.

**Self-Construal Scale (SCS).** The SCS (Singelis, 1994) is a 24-item, 7-point Likert-type (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) measure of interdependent and independent self-construals. Self-construal is described as the constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions regarding (a) individuals' relationships to other people and (b) the self as distinct from other people. An interdependent self-construal is rooted in the fundamental connectedness of individuals to one another, and an independent self-construal is characterized by individuals' foci on their own inner thoughts, feelings, abilities, and actions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The SCS consists of two 12-item subscales that separately assess interdependence and independence. Mean scores for each SCS subscale range from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating higher corresponding self-construal attitudes. Singelis (1994) asserts that both interdependent and independent conceptions of self coexist in every individual.

The SCS was normed on a multiethnic sample of college students and has been reported to have good construct and predictive validity (Singelis, 1994). In the validation sample, the Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the interdependent and independent subscales were .74 and .70, respectively. With the present sample, Cronbach's alphas of .61 were obtained for both the Interdependence and Independent self-construal subscales.

**Demographic questionnaire.** Participants were asked to indicate their sex, race/ethnicity, age, highest degree earned, total number of months of counseling experience, and number of academic courses taken previously related to multicultural or cross-cultural issues.

## Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the variables studied are presented in Table 1. Because of the small numbers of people of color in the overall sample, the data were not analyzed by race/ethnicity. However, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine whether participants differed significantly by sex on the CCCI-R and the two SCS subscales ( $p = .05$ ). The overall MANOVA was significant,  $F(3, 151) = 3.99$ ,  $p$  less than  $.01$ , and follow-up analyses of variance for the scales revealed a significant sex difference for the interdependent self-construal subscale of the SCS,  $F(1, 153) = 11.02$ ,  $p$  less than  $.01$ . In particular, men ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = .58$ ) reported significantly higher interdependent self-construal scores than did women ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = .53$ ). Based on differences by sex, the data for the main analyses were examined separately for men and women.

Two simultaneous multiple regression analyses (i.e., one each for men and women) were conducted using the CCCI-R as the criterion variable. The predictor variables were the number of previous multicultural counseling courses taken and the interdependent and independent self-construal subscales of the SCS.

Table 2 provides a summary of the regression analyses for variables predicting the CCCI-R. Among the men school counselors, the overall regression model was not significant,  $F(3, 53) = 1.37$ ,  $p$  greater than  $.05$ . Among women school counselors, however, the overall model was significant,  $F(3, 94) = 7.95$ ,  $p$  less than  $.001$ , and accounted for 20% of the variance in the CCCI-R (adjusted  $R^2 = .18$ ). Specifically, the number of formal multicultural counseling courses taken and independent self-construal scores were each found to be significant predictors of the CCCI-R.

## Discussion

Despite increasing culturally diverse caseloads for many school counselors across the U.S. (Lee, 1995), there is little empirical research regarding school counselors' multicultural counseling competence. Our study investigated the role of prior academic training in multicultural counseling and interdependent and independent self-construals in predicting school counselors' perceived multicultural counseling competence.

We found that the number of previous multicultural counseling courses taken was significantly predictive of self-reported multicultural counseling competence in women school counselors. Nonetheless, given the dearth of multicultural counseling courses in school counselor training programs (Hobson & Kanitz, 1996), some women school counselors may find their relative lack of training regarding multicultural issues to be a limitation in working with racially and ethnically diverse students. There are numerous ethical issues stemming from this potential practice that may impact school counselors' service delivery to culturally diverse children and youth. For example, it is possible that some school counselors may be providing services that

extend beyond their current level of expertise (Hobson & Kanitz, 1996). Thus, school counselors' potential inability to respond to culturally diverse students in ways that consider the impact of their cultural experiences may result in decreased counseling effectiveness. Therefore, it is vital that school counselors are cognizant of students' cultural backgrounds when performing tasks such as educational and vocational assessments (Facundo, Vazquez-Nuttall, & Walton, 1994), evaluating students' academic progress, conferencing with teachers and families (Atkinson & Juntunen, 1994; Casas & Furlong, 1994), and conceptualizing cases.

Another goal of this study was to assess the role of interdependent and independent self-construals in predicting school counselors' perceived multicultural counseling competence. An interdependent self-construal is associated with individuals' tendency to place value on connectedness to others, social context, and relationships. In contrast, an independent self-construal is characterized by individuals' willingness to base their self-definitions on their unique attributes and abilities and on the importance of distinguishing themselves from others (Cross & Madson, 1997; Singelis, 1994). Previous studies found females to have more interdependent self-construals than males (Oyserman & Packer, 1996). Contrary to prior investigations, we found that men school counselors reported significantly higher interdependent self-construals than their women peers. Furthermore, we found that higher independent self-construal scores were significantly predictive of self-reported multicultural counseling competence in women school counselors. These findings are curious and warrant further attention in future investigations. Nonetheless, it is important to note that some behaviors of school counselors (e.g., offering specific opinions and advice, providing direction and structure, and being interpersonally assertive) are associated with having more independent self-construals (Lee, 1996; Leong, Wagner, & Tata, 1995). Thus, when such behaviors or values are displayed in counseling practice, they could be detrimental to the social, emotional, and academic development of culturally diverse, school-aged children with more interdependent self-construals. Consequently, school counselors with higher independent self-construals may incorrectly encourage interdependent students' (a) separation and individuation from the family, (b) emotional expressiveness without regard to important others' feelings, and (c) assertiveness in interpersonal relationships. It may be important for future investigations to examine how similarities and differences in school counselors' and students' interdependent and independent self-construals may impact counseling process and outcome. Such research may also provide useful information about the ways in which school counselors can increase their effectiveness in working with culturally diverse students.

There are several limitations of the present study that should be noted. First, generalizability of the findings is limited as our convenience sample was geographically bound to the New York City metropolitan area. Future research should explore the variables examined in the current investigation in more geographically diverse samples of school counselors. In addition, our sample was predominantly White. It would be important for future studies to assess similar variables in school counselors who represent a broader range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Third, because the study's measures were self-report in nature, the participants may have responded to some of the instruments in ways that did not reflect their actual attitudes and beliefs. For example, some school counselors in our sample may have over-reported their levels of multicultural counseling competence. Such behaviors could be associated with values

reflected in more independent self-construals such as self-confidence, self-promotion, and assertiveness.

Implications

Our findings underscore the importance of having multicultural counseling courses represented in school counseling curricula. It appears that such courses may help many school counselors to feel efficacious about providing mental health services to culturally diverse students. An important implication of this finding is that school counselors' self-perceived multicultural counseling competence may ultimately translate into their ability to institute culturally relevant and effective interventions with diverse student populations (Constantine & Ladany, 2000). Moreover, training and supervision activities in school counselor programs could focus on ways to assess school counselor trainees' demonstrated multicultural counseling competence, in contrast to evaluating their self-perceived multicultural counseling competence.

Another vital implication of the current study's findings is that school counselors could participate in training activities that focus on increasing their ability to shift between independent and interdependent self-construals to match their clients' cultural worldviews and orientations when warranted. For example, Gardner et al. (1999) found that participants primed with interdependent self-construals displayed shifts towards more collectivistic social values and judgments that were mediated by corresponding shifts in self-construal. This type of cognitive flexibility in counseling situations may be an important indicator of school counselors' demonstrated competence in working with multicultural populations.

Table 1.

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of the Study's Scales

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1. CCCI-R	5.01	.50	--	--	--
2. SCS Interdependent Subscale	3.86	.57	.02	--	--
3. SCS Independent Subscale	4.41	.56	.30 [a]	.06	--

Note. CCCI-R = Cross-Cultural Counseling Competence Inventory-Revised (LaFromboise et al., 1991); SCS = Self-Construal Scale (Singelis, 1994). The mean scores correspond to the range of anchor points for each of the Likert-type scales. Higher scores for each of the study's scales indicate a greater amount of the given variable.

a  $p < .01$ .

Table 2.

Sugary of the Simultaneous Multiple Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting the CCCI-R

Legend for Chart:

A - Predictors

B - Men, B  
 C - Men, SE B  
 D - Men, beta  
 E - Men, t  
 F - Women, B  
 G - Women, SE B  
 H - Women, beta  
 I - Women, t

A	B F	C G	D H	E I
Previous Multicultural Courses	.009 .020	.01 .01	.12 .26	.90 2.84 [a]
SCS Interdependent Subscale	.084 -.019	.10 .09	.11 -.02	.86 -.21
SCS Independent Subscale	.139 .332	.11 .09	.17 .36	1.25 3.85 [b]

Note. CCCI-R = Cross-Cultural Counseling Competence Inventory-Revised (LaFromboise et al., 1991); SCS = Self-Construal Scale (Singelis, 1994).

a  $p < .01$ ; b  $p < .001$ .

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