

## When Colorblindness Hurts: Cultural Competence Implications for Counselors-in-Training

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### Abstract

Misinterpretations of colorblindness can obstruct one from embracing multiculturalism in counselor training programs. Some counselors-in-training struggle to embrace multicultural content, as they believe the racial ideology of *colorblindness* equates cultural sensitivity. This article explains why it is necessary for counselors in training to understand how a colorblind ideology can limit multicultural competence. In addition, personal stories of two graduate students of color currently enrolled in a predominantly White counselor-training program, reaffirm the importance of embracing multiculturalism in counselor training programs.

**Keywords:** racial colorblindness, counseling, pedagogy, multiculturalism

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Racial Ideologies within Counselor-Training Programs

Many people believe the country's changing demographics and increased racial diversity indicates racism and racial discrimination is no longer a significant issue. Historically, the discussion of racial issues in the United States has been met with denial and skepticism. Many who support the idea of a post-racial society have little to no experience regarding negative racial experiences (Ikuenobe, 2013). Therefore, members of the dominant culture are more likely to ascertain the belief that people are treated fairly regardless of the color of their skin (Holcomb-McCoy & Addison-Bradley, 2005). While this stance is intended to be inclusive, it ignores the reality that people of color experience unjust treatment solely based upon the color of their skin.

It has been proven that there is no scientific evidence to determine the biological differences between races (Witzig, 1996). Even so, the color of one's skin remains the largest social construct that exists. The construction of race has been embedded in the fiber of our country and has allowed some to be marginalized and others to receive unfair advantages. This prompts one to judge others based upon the color of their skin. A deconstruction of such an elaborate long-standing system cannot be eradicated with the proclamation of colorblindness. Such a stance simply ignores the unjust treatment and racial wounds people of color face daily.

Counselors-in-training are encouraged to acknowledge the importance of one's racial, social and cultural experience. Exploring race, racial traumas, and cultural differences can assist counselors to better understand their client's experience (Bartoli, Bentley-Edwards, García, Michael & Ervin, 2015; Buckard & Knox, 2004). When counselors-in-training embrace a multicultural approach rather than a colorblind ideology, they are able to embrace the true sense of their client's story because this provides opportunities to highlight and celebrate differences (Holoien & Shelton, 2012). Therefore the ideology of multiculturalism versus the ideology of colorblindness has been extremely valuable in counselor-training programs.

#### 1.2 History of Multiculturalism in Counselor-Training Programs

Conversations about the importance of multiculturalism and diversity began to develop a voice in the 1960's. Vontress (1969) proposed the inclusion of race, culture and ethnicity as an essential part of counseling. His work encouraged practitioners and educators to address the void of cultural diversity in counselor training programs. In addition, he laid the foundation for others to explore culture and diversity in the field of counseling.

The work of Vontress was ground breaking, yet in 1980 not a single counselor education program in the United States offered training in multicultural counseling. Pedersen (1985) reported that traditional counseling techniques were ineffective with racial and ethnic minority groups. Wrenn (1962) suggested counseling professors and students are unaware of their cultural bias due to lack of multicultural training. Ponterotto and Casas (1987) suggested the entire profession of counseling falls short of meeting the mental health needs of diverse populations when multiculturalism is not addressed.

Ponterotto and Casas (1987) identified 5 culturally sensitive counselor-training programs in the United States. The specific traits and commonalities of these programs were glaring. For example, at least one ethnic and racial minority faculty was represented in every program. Each program had a faculty member who was passionate about multicultural issues in counseling evidenced by their years of teaching and research interest. All programs had at least 1 course dedicated to multicultural counseling theory and practice. All programs attempted to infuse multiculturalism and diversity throughout the program curriculum. Collectively, these five programs served as a model to promote multiculturalism in counselor-training programs throughout the United States.

In the early 1990s multiculturalism and counselor training programs became a popular topic. During this period multicultural courses were the most frequently added in counselor-training programs (Holcomb-McCoy & Meyers, 1999). Although the rapid increase of multicultural course curriculum seemed like a step in a positive direction, experts feared courses were taught without a strong perceptual multicultural context. In 1991 Derald Wing Sue, Patricia Arredondo and Roderick J. McDavis created such a framework. After many years of research and dedication to multiculturalism and diversity these scholars developed the Multicultural Competencies and Standards (MCCs).

The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCCs) provided a framework for counselors to work with their clients in a culturally sensitive manner (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992). The model encourages clinicians to explore attitudes & beliefs, knowledge and skills in the following three areas: 1.) Counselor awareness of own cultural values and biases, 2.) Counselor awareness of client's worldview, and 3.) Culturally appropriate intervention strategies. A thorough investigation of the three aforementioned areas provides counselors with the foundation to increase their ability to become more culturally responsive with clients, thus providing a culturally competent ideology.

The development of the MCCs gained momentum and forced accrediting bodies to recognize the importance of multicultural work due to the exposed gap between counselor training and clinical application. In 1993 Council for Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) created accreditation standards related to diversity (Chao, 2013). Soon after, counseling organizations like the American Counseling Association (ACA) and Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) advocated for multiculturalism and diversity in their annual conferences (Dinsmore & England, 1996). Despite the progress that accrediting bodies have made, Parham (2002) suggests that if counselor training programs are to move beyond minimum standards, counselors-in-training must be encouraged to make a careful examination of the racial ideology they employ.

Although the MCCs have provided a strong framework for multicultural competence, one's racial ideology can prevent cultural awareness and understanding (Chao, Wei, Good, & Flores, 2011; Karfantis, Pierre-Lousi, & Levandowski Jr., 2010). It has been reported that a large number of White students in predominately White counselor training programs often embrace an ideology of colorblindness, believing that it contributes to becoming a culturally competent counselor (Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994). Developing an awareness of colorblindness is prudent when exploring racial ideology as a counselor-in-training.

### *1.3 Ideology of Colorblindness*

The intention of colorblindness is to be inclusive, and to treat individuals as equally as possible without regard to race, culture, and ethnicity. It implies that all people are equal, regardless of race, and that racial superiority does not exist (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012; Chao, 2006; Neville, Spanierman, & Doan, 2006). Colorblindness is a type of racial ideology which is an opposition to racial categorization (Mazzocco, Cooper, & Flint, 2011) and emphasizes that any consideration of race is racist itself (Kandaswamy, 2007). Although well intentioned, this ideology's approach to race fosters evasiveness, rather than its initial movement towards assimilation and inclusiveness (Karfantis, Pierre-Louis, & Levandowski Jr., 2010; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). This evasive approach promotes unawareness of the existence of racism, and ignores true inequalities between different racial groups (Chao, 2006).

Employing a colorblind ideology decreases the likelihood one will understand and embrace the standards of multicultural competencies (MCCs). Although a counselor-in-training's intention is to foster inclusiveness and multiculturalism, the exact opposite occurs when colorblindness is embraced. Acknowledging race is an important component when striving for multicultural competence as it promotes self-awareness, respect for other's cultural experience, and allows for an increase in multicultural counseling competence, but also increased levels of empathy,

cultural sensitivity, and greater case conceptualization (Buckard & Knox, 2004; Chao, 2006). Using a colorblind ideology tends to deny the role and influence of race in clients' lives, and cause a counselor to perform actions that are more in line with racial prejudice, rather than social justice (Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001).

Wrenn's (1962) concept of a culturally encapsulated counselor posits that due to being due to being engrossed in traditions, attitudes and psychology geared towards Western or White ideology, the counselor has an immensely difficult time understanding that cultural and racial differences exist among people, and are important in general relationships as well as the counseling relationship. Wrenn goes further to say that failure to acknowledge or appreciate color and cultural differences will communicate disrespect towards the client's cultural background and foster inappropriate and ineffective treatment.

Pope-Davis and Ottavi (1994) proposed that counselors-in-training of color might have higher levels of MCCs compared to their White classmates, due to the lived experiences of race playing a role in daily decision-making. From these experiences, counselors-in-training of color have an increased awareness of their own assumptions, and values – an area which White counselors-in-training may lack. Several studies indicate that White counselors-in-training have lower levels of MCCs than their counterparts of color as the acknowledgment of race is not a part of their daily lives (Buckard & Knox, 2004; Chao, 2006). As such, a White counselors-in-training is more likely to take in an ideology that does not acknowledge the power of race. Low levels of MCCs may imply low levels of self-awareness of White privilege, as using a colorblind ideology is instrumental in the preservation of White privilege" (Kandaswamy, 2007, p. 7). While racism is understood as a concept that puts others at a disadvantage, White privilege is a concept that provides Whites with advantages over other racial groups. Colorblindness utilizes White privilege by assuming that the experiences of White people are natural and neutral (Simpson, 2008). If a White counselor-in-training increased their awareness of White privilege, there would be a decrease in colorblindness.

## **2. Counselor-Training Program Narratives**

The need for an increased focus on a multicultural ideology versus colorblindness is imperative. Students of color in predominately White counselor training programs often experience racial trauma outside of the classroom experience, thus becoming increasingly sensitive to issues that occur within the academic setting. The following stories have been provided by two students of color with the intent of raising awareness that colorblindness is contrary to the mission of multiculturalism. Furthermore the narratives provide additional support that counselors-in-training need to recognize how colorblindness can hinder cultural competency.

### *2.1 Narrative 1*

In August 2011, I moved to Portland, Oregon from Honolulu, Hawaii, to begin a graduate counselor-training program. Growing up in Hawaii, I was always surrounded by classmates and friends who were of Asian descent. While interviewing for the graduate program, I was the only Asian-American student present. Prior to the big move, I understood two key points: 1) I would be an ethnic minority both at a predominantly White institution, and 2) the products or services that were readily available in Hawaii would most likely not be easily obtained in the Pacific Northwest.

I learned during my first month that to acquire the food, skincare, and hair care products suitable to my needs, I would not find them immediately in grocery stores and would need to travel further distances to an Asian specialty store. I also experienced being "exotified" by men when I walked down the street as though I were a rare commodity, receiving sentiments such as "I'd love to get me one of them Asians."

When I shared these difficult experiences with my classmates, they would all respond similarly with, "Looks like graduate school has challenges for everyone!" Although I find this statement true, the hardships that my classmates disclosed were not based on their ethnicity or the color of their skin. The experiences that I shared were difficult for me to go through specifically because I was Asian. My experiences had been minimalized and normalized by people who may not ever have had to make a decision based on their race. The extra set of challenges I faced based on my race were equated to normal graduate school stressors. Intentionally or not, my classmates were engaging in colorblindness; in an effort to include me into the demographic of 'graduate students', my classmates had ignored the true racial inequalities between us.

Initially I began to confront some classmates about their responses; I tried to politely explain that even though academically it was hard for everyone to adjust to graduate school, it had been significantly difficult adjusting to life in the Pacific Northwest as an Asian-American woman. I received remarks similar to, "It seems like everyone's having a hard time in his or her own way." How did I respond? I was silent.

## 2.2 Narrative 2

I gained a wealth of knowledge from my graduate education in Marriage, Couple and Family counseling. I do however know that I routinely experienced a sense of starvation for education and candid conversation in regards to a person's racial, ethnic and cultural background in the counseling process. Due to factors of being raised in a multi-cultural ethnic community as well as being shaped by my experiences as a black person, I understand that my racial and ethnic identity is an important component of understanding who I am and how I interact in the world. Moreover, as a counselor I understand the significance of learning and acknowledging others ethnicity, cultures and background.

This upbringing has helped me realize how important cross-cultural communication is and I found this lacking in my predominately ethnically and culturally white Graduate program. When asked by classmates to further explain a topic I brought up in class around the consideration of race, I routinely heard, "Well that sounds horrible but that kind of injustice really happened a long time ago," or "I don't think that would be comfortable for me as a white person to discuss with clients." "I've never had to talk about race, so I just struggle with even thinking about it," "I'm not a racist, I do my best to treat everyone the same," "I'm a Christian and I learned to love my neighbor," and "It's not about race." It seemed that people's discomfort with color, race and ethnicity hijacked conversations and replaced empathy with fear and blind justification of not bringing certain topics to light in the counseling room.

I would often listen to other students describe a client in a counseling vignette, mentioning several factors that could influence the presenting problem. Seldom would I hear classmates mention the person's race or ethnicity if specified in the vignette. In these discussions my contribution would point out how the client's race could be a factor in the therapeutic process. Reactions of my peers usually consisted of a tense pause and a hurried attempt to move on. It pained me when conversations in class were ended or redirected when the topic of race, racial identity and privilege in race were brought to the forefront.

Following a classroom discussion, a student initiated a conversation regarding statements I made about the importance of addressing race and ethnicity in the counseling relationship. I happily engaged in this conversation but soon realized that this was not an inquiry but an indictment. This student was not open for an exchange of ideas as he promptly attempted to reeducate me on why the focus on race was misguided and would be a hindrance to the therapeutic relationship. My dismay was not that he had a difference in opinion, but my dismay came from his unwillingness to have a conversation that could possibly expand both of our worldviews.

## 3. Colorblind Reactions

From the content of the student narratives and the results of studies described in published literature, there are three types of reactions that occur when one uses a colorblind ideology: dismissive, pseudo-apathetic, or intrusive. Although the student narratives come from a predominantly White population, it is important to note that people-of-color can also employ a colorblind ideology.

### 3.1 Dismissive

When faced with a client of color, Kandaswamy (2007) proposed that White counselors-in-training who employ a colorblind ideology and unaware of their White privilege, may respond in one of two ways: 1) he or she will try to reduce differences to sameness, by immediately focusing on points of commonality between the client of color, or 2) he or she will treat differences as fundamentally disconnected, novel, and segregate these differences from his or her own experience as a White person. An poignant example of the dismissive reaction can be found in the first student narrative, when White classmates stated, "It seems like everyone's having a hard time in his or her own way." The dismissive reaction is a denying of any challenges due to race, and to equate personal experience of a person of color to a general stressor of any graduate student. It is a form of saying, "My personal experience could have been experienced by anyone and race has nothing to do with it." Dismissive reactions can occur when one believes that a person of color is sharing a singular experience, and does not recognize the reality that a person of color is sharing multiple experiences that defines life as an ethnic minority. The significance of this experience and the impact it has made on a person of color is lost within colorblindness.

### 3.2 Pseudo-apathetic

A second type of colorblind reaction occurs when, instead of denying and minimizing an experience, a person is pseudo-apathetic, or sympathizes with the situation. While pseudo-apathetic reactions may come across as empathic, it falls short of acknowledgement and understanding, and instead comes across as sympathy. When sharing an experience, a pseudo-apathetic response may sound like, "I'm *so* sorry that has happened to you! That sounds awful!" or "Well that sounds horrible but that kind of injustice really happened a long time ago." There is a willingness to hear the story on the surface level, but it becomes pacifying when the issues discussed start to dig to a deeper level around privilege, race, and unjust treatment. The pseudo-apathetic reaction initially begins with a sort of awe or fascination, and then

concludes in a distancing in relationship. There is no genuine willingness to sit in the discomfort and hurt of the experience. In an attempt to calm one's own anxiety or discomfort, a pseudo-apathetic response can occur in a form of an apology that does not address the act of pacifying the experience.

### 3.3 Intrusive

An intrusive reaction occurs when a person willingly and eagerly enters a conversation with skepticism and a lack of empathy, with the intent to disprove that race and ethnicity create any type of significant barrier or obstacle. Those who respond intrusively intend to create conversations to challenge this belief by trying to rename, relabel, or reeducate on the experience, by emphasizing that a struggle or stressor is overwhelming for a person based on the experience of their skin color because there is acknowledgment of race and ethnicity. It is a bombardment of unwanted assistance to alter a person's worldview so that the owner of the experience will not see color as a hindrance, attempting to highlight that if race and ethnicity were not the main focus, then these stressors would not be viewed as problems. The second student narrative provides the example of another student who attempted to provide reeducation on the importance of why the focus on race was misguided and would be a barrier within the therapeutic relationship.

The intrusive reaction is interrogating, blaming, and shaming, clinging to misconceived notions that experiencing inequality and pain is because that color has been brought into the picture. There is no time or effort put in to experience a narrative as truth, or acknowledge that an intrusive reaction is occurring when viewing the world through a colorblind lens. Intrusive reactions often occur when a shared experience does not align with preconceived notions about how other members of the same race and ethnicity collectively responded to an experience. These preconceived notions may come from a small paragraph written in a textbook on multiculturalism, or a 10-minute video clip about the history of a group of people. When a shared experience does not align with a preconceived notion, an intrusive reaction would be to ask questions about why this does not make sense through a colorblind lens, instead of asking questions with a genuine curiosity.

Table 1. Colorblind Reactions

	Dismissive	Pseudo-apathetic	Intrusive
Definition	Reducing differences to sameness or segregating differences from one's own experience	Sympathizing, pacifying, and falling short of acknowledgement or understanding	Intending to disprove that race is a stressor by renaming the experience
Example	"It seems like everyone's having a hard time in his or her own way."	"Well that sounds horrible but that kind of injustice really happened a long time ago."	"If you weren't so focused on race, this wouldn't be a problem."
Occurrence	Believing that a difference is only a singular experience	Willing to hear an experience but distancing in discomfort	Having a pre-conceived notion that does not align with a colorblind lens

Characteristics of three types of colorblind reactions that counselors-in-training may use intentionally or unintentionally.

## 4. Responses to Colorblindness

Those who employ a colorblind ideology use these three colorblind reactions frequently. It is important to note however that people of color are also accountable for how they choose to respond to these colorblind reactions. When those who use colorblindness equate racial stressors as general stressors, people of color can choose to attempt to explain these racial stressors more thoroughly, or choose to remain silent. Most often when a person of color is on the receiving end of dismissiveness, pseudo-apathy, or intrusiveness, the person of color may assume that if the truth about these experiences and racial stressors were explained, it would make people feel uncomfortable. Feeling uncomfortable would justify that racial stressors were no different than the general stressors of others.

Responding to colorblindness most often comes in the form of silence. Experience for people of color has proven to them, that telling the truth and breaking the silence when discussing race can be upsetting and uncomfortable to others. Trying to honestly and openly explain that how these experiences occurred strictly due to race creates discomfort for

those using a colorblind ideology. Responding to colorblind reactions may be like trying to explain what salt tastes like to someone who has never tasted it. But if people of color choose to remain silent, they are also choosing to perpetuate an ideology that ignores racial inequalities.

What does silence do in the face of racism? It includes everyone and prevents racial categorization, but also makes the very topic of race off limits to talk about. Everyone is silent for different reasons; the ones who use colorblindness knowingly or unknowingly are silent when the truth becomes uncomfortable, and people of color become silent when experiences are minimized or ignored. If everyone is quiet however, the issue of racism will not be talked about, and there will be no resolutions or changes. Counselor-in-training members of the majority, who do not need to make daily decisions based on the color of their skin, need to recognize that when having a conversation with a person of color, one must enter the conversation with a genuine willingness to *understand* the significance behind their stories. It is very easy to back away when things start to become uncomfortable, because a small five-minute conversation is merely a small image of a singular experience. The challenge will be to hold steady in discomfort, and recognize that a person of color's story is more than just a singular experience – it is an entire span of their life. The response will communicate how one views race. Will the response dismiss the experience and liken it to a general stressor? Will the response be sympathetic, and pacify the issue? Or will the response be truly, genuinely, and honest with an understanding and recognition in regards to *how* and *why* this experience was so impactful?

Finally to the counselor-in-training members of the minority, who understand what it is like to face challenges due to race, remember that in the face of racism, do not remain silent. Although experience has shown us that revealing the truth about racial inequalities makes people uncomfortable, remaining silent will only perpetuate the problem. Counselors-in-training must be aware that people of color have important stories to tell – stories that have shaped how they act, how they perceive, and how they survive. Breaking the silence, and potentially putting others in slightly uncomfortable situations, is the only way we can advocate for embracing multicultural competencies versus using a colorblind ideology. As people planning to work in the mental health profession, there needs to be a collective effort from all members to move beyond the minimum standard of a single multiculturalism course. For this profession to reach higher levels of cultural competence all counselors-in-training must carefully examine their current racial ideology and recognize that *everyone* is capable of speaking out in the face of racism, and every voice brings us one step closer to fully embracing multiculturalism. In order to remove the elephant from the room, we must first begin talking about it.

## 5. Conclusion

The Multicultural Competencies and Standards invited counselors to explore a culturally sensitive methodology when working with clients, and provided an introductory framework for counselor-training programs to encourage awareness of diversity (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992). From the development of the MCCs, accrediting bodies such as CACREP incorporated multiculturalism into its accrediting criteria, while counseling organizations such as ACA and ACES facilitated conferences focused on the advocacy of racial and ethnic diversity. Despite the introduction and implementation of a multicultural framework in the helping profession however, an ideology of colorblindness may be hindering any further progress.

It has been argued that although a colorblind ideology is well intentioned and thought to be inclusive, it tends to foster exclusiveness and impede a counselor's ability to empathize and build a secure therapeutic relationship with a client. Colorblindness is a racial ideology that supports the belief that any consideration of race is racist itself and opposes any type of racial categorization. Within a counselor-training program, using a colorblind ideology and reacting in a colorblind manner can prevent one from fully embracing multiculturalism within the classroom. Colorblindness can perpetuate cultural mistrust when it is integrated into relationships with others, preventing a sense of community and connection, as conversations about race within the classroom are met with a mixture of confusion, hostility, fear, and silence.

Ultimately the continuous use of a colorblind ideology within a counselor-training program, harmoniously interacting with the silence of students of color, will further perpetuate the power of racism. For counselors-in-training struggling to embrace multicultural content, they must first carefully examine the current racial ideology employed. This increased awareness will provide counselors-in-training an honest platform to assess if they have reacted or responded in a colorblind manner to people of different races and ethnicities. This recommendation applies to *all* counselors-in-training, members of the majority and minority population alike, as building a therapeutic relationship begins with acknowledging the power and impact that a singular experience can have on shaping a person's life.

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