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Fostering group counseling and social justice competence through community-based programs

Abstract

This qualitative study explored the reactions of 12 counselor trainees to community-based group counseling work. The impact of community outreach on counselor conceptualizations of client problems, and the development of social justice competence were of particular interest. Analysis of results using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology revealed an emphasis on the following domain areas: Increased awareness of client and self, a shift in social justice attitudes and interest, and an increased awareness of systemic problems and injustices. Core ideas associated with each of these domains, as well as suggestions for future research, are discussed.

Keywords

Social justice, counselor training, community outreach, group counseling

Author's Notes

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Historically, counselors have expressed their commitment to social justice work by empowering clients to confront oppression, human rights abuses, marginalization, and injustice to produce lasting societal changes (Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006). Promoting social justice and respect for human diversity are considered core counselor values (ACA 2014). In the 1990s, social justice began to gain ground in the field of counseling, with the aim of combating racism through prevention and changes in social policies (Fouad et al., 2006). Even though social justice advocacy and multicultural competency has been added into training and practice of counseling programs (ACA, 2014), counseling students feel unprepared, and lacking training in undertaking social justice work (Miller & Sendrowitz, 2011).

Social justice competence is a key element of multicultural training as defined from the revised Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016). Understanding the systemic forces that affect clients and infusing multiculturalism in training may redefine the role of counselors as advocates, and aid their efficiency (Vera & Speight, 2003). Counselors become skilled social justice advocates through working with marginalized communities and individuals by removing barriers and developing critical thinking about systemic issues (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Freire, 1990). According to D'Andrea (2009), training programs tend to overemphasize the effectiveness of evidence-based approaches to counseling. Although these empirically-supported approaches are invaluable, without critical consideration, they present significant limitations when applied to marginalized individuals. For example, D'Andrea reported that White middle-class clients receiving client-centered therapy consistently reported better outcomes than poor youths of color. Thus, the question that arises is, how do we better train counselors to serve populations that are marginalized? Over the past four decades, several studies have addressed the unique counseling

needs of diverse populations (Berkel & Lucas, 2005; Bradley & Sanders, 2003). However, few of these studies have explored the impact of counseling practicums that aim to serve marginalized or underserved populations, on the development of student skills and their interest in social justice issues.

Literature Overview

Training with Diverse Populations

In the field of counseling, multicultural competence is considered a core skill (American Counseling Association, 2014; Arredondo et al., 1996; Ratts et al., 2016). Acquiring multicultural competence is a developmental process (Sue & Sue, 2012) defined as having awareness, knowledge, and skills in identifying and understanding the differences between one's own cultural background and the background of one's clients (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi & Bryant, 2007). Multiculturally competent counselors are able to select suitable interventions based on cultural awareness (Sue & Sue, 2012). Additionally, social justice competencies include knowledge of systems of oppression, counselor self-reflection of personal variables, and continuous questioning of the appropriateness of practices/interventions and advocacy work (Constantine et al., 2007). Psychoeducational groups and outreach activities targeting marginalized populations, may create beneficial training opportunities, for multicultural and social justice counseling for trainees (Cakes, Schaeffe, Smoby, Maddux, & LeBeauf, 2007; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010). Subsequently, trainees may empower individuals and educate them about the societal forces that impede their wellbeing. Empowering and educating marginalized groups about the injustices they have faced may lead to psychological liberation, a significant goal of multicultural and social justice oriented counseling (Crethar, Torres Rivera, & Nash, 2008).

Social justice advocacy represents a natural evolution of multicultural competence, through which trainees have the opportunity to serve marginalized groups by applying their knowledge (Presseau, Luu, Inman, & DeBlaere, 2018). When counselors work with marginalized populations they experience reality from a different perspective, increasing their ability to understand the effects of oppression on their clients (Speight & Vera, 2004). Real world experience such as engaging in community activities with diverse populations can be helpful in preparing culturally competent counselors (Midgett & Dumas, 2016; Cates et. al., 2007; Mio, Barker-Hackett & Tumaming, 2006). Through hands-on community-based work, counselor trainees are exposed to populations they may know little about, an experience that provides an excellent opportunity for gaining greater awareness of the struggles of different cultural groups (Vera & Speight, 2003). It follows that counselors with well-developed multicultural competence are perhaps more likely to look beyond individual interventions to the systems in need of change that impact their clients on a daily basis, which may lead them to take a greater interest in social justice initiatives.

Awareness of varying levels of oppression that clients face is essential to helping counselor trainees recognize opportunities for social justice work (Steele, 2011). However, mere exposure to a diverse client base does not always bring about a desire to work toward systemic change as indicated by trainees who reported feeling unprepared to do this work (Cates et. al., 2007). For example, the development of a social justice advocacy orientation in counselor trainees can be fostered and enhanced through supervision (Glossoff & Durham, 2010). This type of focus could lead to micro level or individually based interventions, as opposed to systemically based inventions that would contribute to major societal changes (Constantine, 1997). Counselor trainees may become more sensitive to opportunities for affecting macro-level change through

fostering meaningful relationships, understanding the structural societal powers, and how they impact different groups (Comstock et al., 2011). Through gaining awareness of social injustice and receiving exposure to marginalized groups via community work, counselors may have the opportunity to develop greater awareness of their own identity and a stronger interest in social justice work (Cook, Krell, Hayden, Gracia, & Denitzio, 2016; Glossoff & Durham, 2010). Additionally, community engagement and services such as advocacy, prevention and outreach are crucial in multiculturally competent and communitarian social-justice based practice (Cates et al., 2007; Vera & Speight, 2003).

Training Social Activists

According to Beer, Spanierman, Greene, and Todd (2012), training environments can play a critical role in the development of social justice commitment. Beer et al. (2012) noted that trainees who were highly committed to activism indicated that they empathized with individuals who were marginalized either through exploration of their own marginalized identities (e.g., racial minority, female) or through developing close relationships with members from the marginalized group. In addition, trainees with privileged identities (e.g., White men) highlighted the need for using their privilege as a tool for social change. The development of a social justice orientation cannot be achieved through theoretical exploration alone, but through a change in the individual's life orientation (Gazzola, LaMarre, & Smoliak, 2017). Furthermore, Goodman et al. (2004) suggested that critical self-examination, sharing power, raising awareness, and enabling clients to work towards social change, represent the feminist and multicultural principles of social justice work. Interacting with individuals affected by oppression may also bolster a sense of self-efficacy through participation in social change, and as a result, may increase multicultural competence. Finally, Buckley (1998) theorized that students infused with social justice and

humanitarianism should display sensitivity to injustice and innocent suffering in the world (the affective dimension of social justice), knowledge of the conditions that cause and perpetuate human suffering (the intellectual dimension of social justice), and skills that will allow them to effectively intervene (the pragmatic/volitional dimension).

It is worth noting that the bulk of the literature on social justice focuses on advocacy and macro-level interventions. It is the opinion of the authors that even though macro-level interventions are essential and achieving change on a systemic level is the ultimate goal of social justice advocates, counselors should be grounded in the micro-level interventions that occur in the therapeutic work of counseling. As noted by Lewis (2010), it is restrictive to think of social justice activities that only focus on changing societal values. For example, counselor trainees who have adopted strong social justice values may be more aware of a client's vulnerability to experiences of injustice than trainees who have not had exposure to or time to develop a social justice perspective. Lewis (2010) also noted that trainees with a strong social justice orientation are likely to understand the forces of oppression on their own lives, and as a result, may feel more prepared to "deal with the world." Cook, Brodsky, Gracia, and Morizio (2018) found that counselor trainees who engaged in fieldwork indicated development of personal growth, specifically in the areas of self-awareness, counseling, and advocacy skills.

In addition to promoting an increased interest in social justice activities, engaging students in community work promotes several other pedagogical factors. For example, compared to traditional teaching models, use of innovative learning approaches such as community service has been connected to significant positive outcomes for trainees (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). According to Astin et al. (2000), such outcomes include an increased ability to apply principles to new situations, greater understanding and tolerance of diversity issues, and an

increase in the number of trainees who decide to pursue careers related to community service. Furthermore, non-traditional pedagogies, involving service learning with supportive supervision, may prepare trainees to work with marginalized populations (Toporek & Worthington 2014). Inman, Luu, Pendse, and Caskie (2015) found a positive relationship between the belief in an unjust world and a greater interest in social justice advocacy. Additionally, Inman et al. found that social justice commitment was affected (directly or indirectly) by social justice self-efficacy, and by strengthening interest in social justice activities. We argue that the enriching effects of community engagement described in the literature suggest that providing trainees with a solid interest in community-based counseling activity places them in a position to engage in greater micro and macro level change as professionals. In order to learn more about the activities that affect social justice attitudes, an exploration of trainee reactions to community-based work is necessary.

Application to the Current Study

The current study aimed to explore counselor trainee reactions to involvement in psycho-educational community groups. Specifically, our goal was to explore the development of the affective (empathy, understanding of client's worldview), intellectual (awareness of barriers to success in treatment) and pragmatic dimensions (practical skills, ability to properly execute interventions and advocacy) of social justice (Buckley, 1998). Although students were expected from the outset of training to hone their group counseling skills, very little was known about how they might react to the community group experience from an alloplastic, multicultural perspective. While previous studies have focused on service learning programs and their relationship to participant social justice attitudes (i.e., Toporek & Worthington, 2014), and trainee attitudes toward advocacy and multicultural factors (Cook et al., 2018), there are no

published studies to date that have examined the effect of community-based group counseling programs on the development of a social justice orientation. Community-based group counseling may differ from other service-learning programs in that they are based on multiple interactions of participants in a collective setting that allows rapport to form not just with one person but with a small interactive community of people, facing similar struggles (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, p. 6.). This will allow students to observe group process and join with the community in a open and trusting space.

Although a limited body of literature has addressed community engagement and service learning as counselor training activities (i.e., Midgett, Housheer, & Doumas, 2016; Toporek, Dodge, Tripp, & Alarcon, 2010), there are few studies to date that have explored counselor trainee reactions to community-based group counseling (i.e., Cook et. al., 2018). The current study is the first to explore trainee reactions to counseling with marginalized groups and the development of a social justice orientation. In order to gain a vivid and full description of the experience of trainees, and allow them to talk about the personal impact of their community work (McLeod, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994), a qualitative methodology was selected for gathering and analyzing data. Since this study was exploratory in nature, we did not seek to confirm specific hypotheses, but generally sought to answer the following questions: What were counselor trainee reactions to their community-based practicum experiences? More specifically, how do trainees who have worked in community-based settings view social justice?

Method

Participants

Study participants were twelve, second-year master's level mental health counseling students at a Midwest university including 7 women and 5 men, ranging from 23 to 29 years of age ($M = 25$). Nine participants self-identified as White/European American, two as Asian-American, and one as a Chinese international student. All participants received multicultural training through their practicum and multicultural counseling courses. Participants were also given an orientation to each group site, including basic information about the populations they would be working with and a discussion on the challenges that members typically encounter.

All participants had completed 10 community group training hours within the past year, during the first year of their master's program at either a group home for recently released prisoners, an arts program for children with emotional and developmental issues, or an assisted living facility for older adults. All group members had experienced significant social barriers and oppression in some way. For example, both members of the children's group and the recently released prisoners had experienced poverty and discrimination, and all group members experienced a lack of resources (such as information on securing social services), and adequate social support. Some participants completed group hours at more than one of these sites and a few participants reported having community-based volunteer experience prior to beginning their master's studies. Participants reported a range of 10-20 hours of community-based experience at the time they were interviewed for this study.

Community groups facilitated by students were psychoeducational in nature, covering topics such as self-esteem, grief, and career exploration. Groups generally ranged from 3-12 members and were co-facilitated by two master's level counselor trainees. These groups were

offered on-site in the community as part of a larger rehabilitative or skill-building program. Trainees were provided group supervision throughout their experience by counseling psychology doctoral students in the counseling department. Doctoral students were supervised by department faculty.

Researchers

The research team consisted of five doctoral students, three undergraduate students, and one faculty member. Two doctoral students (both women) served as participant interviewers, while three students (two men and one woman) were responsible for coding tasks. Undergraduate students were responsible for transcribing interview data. The team faculty member served as consultant for the study design and analysis of the data. All researchers were careful to adhere to American Counseling Association (ACA) and American Psychological Association (APA) ethical standards for conducting research.

Procedures

Participant interviews. Once the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited via departmental email listserv and through in-person contact. All Master's students in the mental health counseling program who had completed group hours in a community setting were asked to consider participating. All 12 students who volunteered were selected. Per CQR guidelines, data should be gathered through individual or focus group interviews (Hill et al., 1997). In order to give trainees the opportunity to hear about the group experiences of others and to encourage a natural discussion, participants were interviewed in focus groups of three people, on four separate occasions, over a 2-week period. Participants were placed in focus groups according to their availability. Semi-structured in-person interviews were approximately two hours in length. Participants were asked to reflect upon their experiences

working with community groups through questions such as, “What was challenging about working with this population?” and, “What was the most important thing you learned from your experience?” In addition, participants were asked to describe their views on social justice and how the need for systemic change might relate to the population represented in their community groups. Sample questions included, “Did you notice any societal advantages or disadvantages in the population you worked with?” and, “Based on your experience, do you believe training programs adequately value and/or promote social justice work?” These questions served as a springboard for discussion and elaboration was encouraged.

Participants were also encouraged to add information during the conversation, whether related to the interview questions or not, that they felt was relevant. At the beginning of each interview session, participants completed a demographic questionnaire including questions pertaining to group facilitation. They were informed of the confidential nature of the study and asked to keep discussion content private. Each participant was assigned a number and asked to state their number before commenting in order to protect confidentiality in the audio-recording. Participants were also asked to use assigned numbers when referring to other participants in the focus group (e.g., “*My experience was similar to number three’s...*”). All participants followed this protocol, and everyone was given an opportunity to respond to questions posed by the researchers. Focus groups were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim. Assigned participant numbers were not connected to the demographic data collected.

Coding and analysis. The current study utilized Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), a rigorous approach in which researchers use a standardized coding process in order to examine a specific phenomenon of interest in-depth. Three team members were trained to code the data using Consensual Qualitative Research guidelines (CQR;

Hill, et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005). Each team member coded transcribed interview responses into domains, categories, and subcategories based on commonly occurring themes they observed throughout the focus group discussions. Hill et al. (1997) define a domain as a topic area used to group a large amount of information. Within domains exist specific categories and often within them subcategories. Each coder established domains and categories based on their own background knowledge and unique interpretation of the data. Although the coding team was aware of the purpose of the study, they were asked to take an exploratory approach to the data, noting what they observed rather than attempting to answer a specific set of questions. They were also encouraged to acknowledge and discuss any biases that might affect their assessment of the data. The initial coding process was completed individually, then the team later convened to discuss their results and to reach a consensus on the coding of the data. To ensure adequate rigor, two of the principal investigators served as internal auditors of the data, revising domain, category, and subcategory titles, once the coding team reached a consensus. Although the names of domains and categories were revised, the original distribution of the data created by the coding team was maintained.

As a qualitative method, CQR was designed to use language rather than numbers to describe the stability of the domains (Hill et al., 2005). Domains were identified as general, typical, or variant (Hill et al., 1997) based upon frequency, or the number of participants endorsing these ideas. According to Hill et al.'s (1997; 2005) guidelines for CQR, domains and categories were classified as *general* if all or nearly all participants indicated endorsement, *typical* if 50% or more endorsed the core idea, or *variant* if a few participants endorsed the category. In the current study, domains were considered *general* if endorsed by 10-12 participants, *typical* if endorsed by 4-9, and *variant* if indicated by 2-3 participants. When

organizing data points into frequencies, the coders took care to include the participant number associated with each quote in order to avoid counting more than one quote from the same participant for each core idea that was endorsed. Each quote that was used to determine the frequency of the domain, was reviewed by the auditors in order to ensure accuracy, and increase the rigorousness of the coding process.

Results

Researchers were able to identify three general domain areas and 19 core ideas related to participant' reactions to their community-based group counseling experiences. There were no subcategories noted. The first domain, increased awareness of client and self, answered the first research question (What were counselor reactions to their community based practicum experience?), and the second and third domains respond to the second research question (How do trainees who have worked in community based settings view social justice?). Each domain contained multiple categories or core ideas. Core ideas are summarized with key data points below.

Table 1. *Summary of final domains, categories, and frequency of responses*

Domain	Core Ideas	Frequency*
Increased awareness of client and self	Realization of biases and stereotypes	General
	Awareness of community hardships	Typical
	Increased understanding of privilege	Typical
	Deeper understanding of injustices in the community	Typical
	Better understanding of self	Variant
	Better understanding of the therapeutic process	Variant
	Increased understanding of the client's worldview	Variant
	Awareness of inequality in the counseling relationship	Variant
	Awareness of inequality based upon SES	Variant
	Working with different group variables	Variant
Adapting to situational variables	Variant	
Shift in social justice attitudes and interests	Awareness of societal influences on the individual	Typical
	Awareness of responsibility of community involvement	Typical
	Increased interest in social justice oriented counseling	Variant
	Better understanding of multicultural and environmental factors	Variant
Increased awareness of systemic problems and injustices	Utilizing a systemic approach	Variant
	Awareness of systemic imbalance of power	Variant
	Benefits of community group work	Variant
	Awareness of limits of helping capability	Variant

**Number of participants endorsing the core idea: General = 10-12, Typical = 4-9, Variant = 2-3*

Increased Awareness of Client and Self

Personal bias and stereotypes. The most frequently endorsed ideas (general and typical) fell under the domain of increased awareness of client and self. Most ideas in this domain were those related to greater personal understanding of biases and stereotypes (general). In addition, comments or ideas related to privilege (typical), injustices in the community (typical), and an increased understanding of the client's worldview (variant) also made up categories in this domain. All participants indicated greater realization of biases and stereotypes (general). Furthermore, all participants indicated that they initially held biases about the group population they were working with that were later challenged. The following statement from one participant regarding working with the older adult population illustrates how the participant's preconceived notion shifted once they began facilitating groups in an assisted living facility:

With the elderly population, my bias was that I was going to impart this information upon them; that I was going to give them something that they hadn't heard before, and these women have lived well into their 70s and 80s. I'm sure they've heard most of what I've said along the way and that it's actually more them telling me things that I've not ever heard or learned before.

Understanding of the counseling process. Some of the participants indicated that they learned more about themselves and how they perceive the world outside their own communities (variant). One participant commented that their community group experience helped them achieve a greater connection to their clients and enhanced their understanding of the counseling process. The participant commented:

What I learned from both groups was more about myself than anything else, who I am and how I approach different individuals, what makes me comfortable and uncomfortable. I learned more about letting go of insecurities I have and that it's not

about me at that point...it's more about the connection between the two of us or the seven of us, than about following a theory or a closed or open-ended question and other small things that go through your head, but at that moment it's about, 'have I provided a comfortable space.'

Flexibility. Some participants indicated that they gained flexibility in adapting to situational variables (variant), such as late start times, late additions to their groups, and a change in topic. One participant commented:

I learned how to be flexible. If the session doesn't go in the direction that was anticipated, or if the participants would like to stay with one topic or move to a different one when they see fit, I roll with it.

Another participant commented that although they worried that their training had not fully prepared them for adjusting to last-minute changes, the participant realized that they were able to apply what they had learned in order to adapt to different client needs. The participant commented:

I struggled with not knowing what would be the best way to meet [my clients'] needs, and then just not having all of the experience up-front, and just going, 'How do I do this?' 'I don't really know what's going on.' 'I don't know if I have all of the training.' So I think just being flexible with what knowledge I had on hand helped.

Struggles in the community. In addition to an enhanced awareness of self, several participants indicated a greater understanding of community hardships (typical). Specifically, the majority of participants commented on the struggles they witnessed in the community and the new understanding they assumed as a result. For example, one participant commented, "I think the main struggle I witnessed was just that it was hard for people to be consistent because they

didn't have the resources to always get their kids to the program [site].”

Several participants were struck by the poverty they witnessed in the community and indicated greater understanding of the impact of living with a lack of resources. Participants typically stated that this realization helped them better understand the environmental and social barriers that may impact a client's ability to make positive changes. One participant commented:

I guess I became kind of frustrated with the idea that it seemed like there were certain barriers to [clients] to be able to do things to positively impact their environment like get natural foods because of where [the neighborhood] was located and then not having any kind of accessible transportation.

Another participant commented:

My experience with [recently released prisoners] drove home what change needs to occur. It became really obvious what a negative effect criminalizing addiction has had on people's lives, in particular, people who are from lower SES backgrounds.

Shift in Social Justice Attitudes and Interests

Understanding systemic problems. Many of the participants indicated having a better understanding of societal influences on the individual (typical) including how clients could become stuck in unhealthy patterns of behavior. A few stated that they had the opportunity to immerse themselves in the community and gain an understanding of how systemic problems are continually reinforced. Participants typically indicated that their community group experiences had given them greater insight into why some clients have difficulty making positive changes.

One participant commented on this new understanding by stating:

I could see how this population would maybe re-offend and not be able to better themselves. Because of the stigma they can't get jobs so they may go out and re-sell

drugs or whatever, to make money and have an income.

Another participant stated, “Individuals are going to try to regain control by whatever means possible, whether that’s constructive or destructive, and it affects not just that one individual but everyone in some way.”

Greater interest in outreach. In addition to an increased awareness of systemic problems, some participants indicated a greater interest in becoming involved in social justice activities (variant) including and working toward providing access to mental health care to those who might not otherwise be able to afford these services. One participant commented:

[These groups] have given me a different perspective on working with impoverished communities and maybe more of the need to work with people who may not have the resources to afford counseling. It helped along that process of creating a different perspective of who really needs counseling the most and what can we do to make counseling available for everybody regardless of if they can afford it or not.

Another participant commented that their experience working in the community had changed their willingness to engage in advocacy with individual clients.

It’s helped change the work that I do with my individual clients. I advocate [for] them more and I’m more aware of how the system can work for them and against them and sometimes – so, not being more of the problem but actually helping them.

Feeling overwhelmed. Finally, some participants stated that they had experienced an increased interest in social justice oriented counseling (variant) after participating in community groups but within this domain, some indicated that they were feeling overwhelmed by the power of systemic problems, and did not necessarily know how to go about changing them. One participant stated:

[Participating in community groups] increased my interest in social justice but decreased my feeling of efficacy in being able to make changes on a systems scale. Just knowing that we could help the children in a lot of different ways but we only saw them an hour a week, whereas, some of their negative habits may be reinforced every other hour whether it be with the family or with the schools, just realizing that – the task of social justice is a really tall order.

Another participant stated, “Just trying not to be a part of a system that oppresses people and trying to empower clients individually to be able to handle it – I guess those things that are kind of difficult to change.”

These participants indicated that they wanted to contribute to change in the client’s life but indicated that they felt frustrated by “the system.” As one participant reported, “I think with [recently released prisoners] it’s just sometimes frustrating to see how the system is working against them and society is working against them to actually become productive parts of society.”

Increased Awareness of Systemic Problems and Injustices

Social injustice. Some participants indicated that they became aware of systemic problems and the importance of utilizing a systemic approach (variant). They noted awareness of problems that presented barriers to achieving emotional and mental wellbeing for many of their clients. Some expressed feelings of frustration with the limits of their own helping capability (variant) and with societal systems that prevented clients from benefiting from care. One participant stated the following about working with children:

Some children were disadvantaged, some were more advantaged. Access to a private babysitter as opposed to community daycare, or adequate clothing, was something I was

able to witness and could see just what that money meant was services or resources available to some and not to others.

Another participant commented:

[The children] didn't always appear to have access to the things that they could have really used and it seemed based solely on their SES. If you had seven kids in a group maybe one of them came from a more middle class background, so it's like that one child had access to a lot of things and you could really tell there was a difference. They had better social skills and they seemed better cared for.

Others commented that they witnessed similar injustices in the recently released prisoner population. One participant commented:

These acts that got them in trouble are not just isolated events that happened in a vacuum. There've been generational situations and things that are greater than them as a person that have kind of brought them to this point.

Another participant stated, "It was just really obvious that these guys were probably being harassed by the cops all the time, even if they weren't doing something wrong they still were being harassed."

Power and privilege. Some participants indicated that they experienced an increased understanding of the systemic imbalance of power (variant) particularly between themselves and their clients, and how this imbalance might affect the therapeutic relationship. One participant remarked:

I have been aware of oppression and how low socioeconomic status can keep you down and can also lead to problems but if I hadn't been exposed to that before...the group definitely opened my eyes... it did continue to confirm those ideas, that there are

problems that don't fit into a nice little diagnosis and a nice little box that may be contributed to by our society.

When asked how the participants felt about the notion of working hard in order to get ahead, several commented that they did not believe hard work could compensate for the inequalities they witnessed in the communities they encountered. One participant commented:

It's kind of an elitist thing to say, you know, that if you work hard enough, you could achieve this. I think it's kind of a typical American dream story that we're kind of fed. I think it can be good for some people because I think that it can give them some hope that they can get through tough times by working hard, but I think that it's too simplistic of a statement.

Another participant expressed that they strongly believed the idea of "hard work to get ahead" to be an unfair assumption. They stated:

I was thinking about a member in the [recently released prisoner] group. He grew up during the Jim Crow [era]. How can you not be angry, being a Black man? Also coming from a low-income culture, there're so many forces against you, but it's just like, 'Oh, just work hard, but you're not going to get anywhere.' You know, it's just bullshit!"

Discussion

The overarching purpose of this study was to explore counselor trainee reactions to community-based training experiences (Research Question 1). Overall, participants indicated a better understanding of their own strengths and limitations as a counselor after participating in this practicum experience. These statements are consistent with the broad body of previous research on counselor development which has found that increased experience and development of a counselor identity contributed to greater self-awareness (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010)

and self-efficacy (Kozina, Grabovari, De Stefano, & Drapeau, 2010). In addition, many participants in the current study reported a better understanding of self, as a counselor and an increased understanding of client worldviews, which also supports previous research on counselor development (i.e., Gibson et al., 2010; Kozina et al., 2010; Lyons & Hazler, 2002).

In addition to general reactions to community based training, the specific purpose of the study was to explore how trainees who have worked in community based settings, view social justice (Research Question 2). Findings of the current study indicated that the majority of counselor trainees who participated in community group counseling became aware of their own biases and stereotypes throughout the experience, which is vital to the formation of multicultural competency as a counselor (APA, 2017; Sue et al., 1998). Furthermore, results suggested that conducting groups in the community provided social justice opportunities to students and contributed to growth in their flexibility, personal awareness, counseling skills, empathy, understanding of social injustice and privilege, and promoted a more systemic conceptualization of client problems.

Exposure and Discouragement

As noted by Buckley (1998) and indicated by Ratts et al. (2016) in the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, students with social justice-infused training should develop affective, intellectual, and pragmatic sensitivity to social justice activities. It appears that students in the current study demonstrated development of social awareness, understanding of injustice, and development of empathy. However, even though most of the students indicated an increased interest in social justice, it appears that there was a lack of development in the pragmatic dimension (such as advocacy skills) of social justice work. For example, one student indicated that they became more interested in social justice work but felt less confident about

their ability to efficaciously contribute to systemic changes. Throughout their contact with the group members (children) this participant became more aware of the impact of different systems, such as family, school, and overall community, on their work as a counselor. This participant's comment makes reference to what may be a common problem in trainee perceptions of social justice work: students may be motivated to engage in social justice activities but because of the lack of tools and skills they have developed, they become overwhelmed and discouraged. Conversely, this comment indicates that this participant developed a more in-depth conceptualization of the social influences and systemic barriers that clients are likely to face.

Developing a critical thinking and critical consciousness is another element of multicultural competence within a social justice framework (Freire, 1990; Steele, 2008). According to the participant experiences described above, when exposed to systemic injustices, counselor trainees might become acutely aware of the systemic forces and the role they play in a client's "pathology," but may simultaneously feel overwhelmed by injustice in the world, which could result in self-doubt. We could also argue that trainees recognize their power and impact in clients' lives is very small compared to systemic forces, which is an accurate assessment of reality and may serve as motivation for systemic change as long as trainees feel empowered affect such change.

Implications for Training Programs

Encouraging realistic expectations. Training programs should not only encourage students to engage in community work but also teach practical skills and educate trainees about potential barriers. Education and experience with community work may help students develop realistic expectations, and the ability to focus on making small changes in their community (Cook et al., 2016). Our findings suggest that counseling trainees became increasingly frustrated

with institutional dynamics throughout their interaction with marginalized communities. This frustration, in turn, encouraged a critical analysis of the institutional system clients must function within, which could lead to greater empathy for marginalized groups. Previous research has suggested hope to be the mediator of differentiation of self and social justice commitment (Sandage, Crabtree, & Schweer, 2014). Maintaining hope and feeling efficacious in the implementation of change appear to be crucial ingredients in creating social justice advocates. Furthermore, by developing a better understanding of a client's internal and external resources, trainees may develop an in-depth conceptualization of their work and the ability to see beyond their client's psychopathology.

Utilizing a strength-based approach. Although a strong awareness of systemic problems and injustices, one of domains identified in the results of this study, is necessary for developing multicultural competence, this awareness may leave counselor trainees in the early stages of development feeling overwhelmed by the struggles of clients from marginalized groups. In addition to recognizing client barriers, it is important for trainees to recognize their clients' strengths (Ratts et al., 2016). Focusing on client strengths, sharing power through an egalitarian relationship, confronting automatic biases toward marginalized groups, and helping clients understand the impact of systemic forces in their lives, are important social justice principles for trainees to understand when working from a micro-level perspective (Goodman et al., 2004). In order to develop a social justice infused identity, supervisors should encourage trainees to develop awareness of systemic problems, in addition to highlighting and enhancing the strengths of marginalized populations that our society underestimates.

Fostering commitment. Our findings may indicate that involvement with groups that serve marginalized populations contributed to student interest in social justice work. It appears

that student interactions with diverse community populations helped them develop a more systemic perspective on individual issues and personally touched them enough to develop an interest in the social justice field. Keeping this newfound increased interest in mind, it is important to differentiate between interest and commitment. Commitment is found to be a greater predictor of involvement in social justice work when compared to interest (Sandage, Crabtree, & Schweer, 2014). Commitment must be continually fostered through supervision and program supported practicum opportunities that encourage the application of developing social justice skills.

Limitations and Future Directions

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methodology does not allow the researcher to control or manipulate study variables (Wang, 2008), which in turn does not allow any conclusions about cause-effect relationships to be drawn. Thus, this study cannot be used to draw conclusions about the specific effects of training with marginalized populations and developing an interest in social justice. Results should be interpreted as exploratory findings that describe one of many avenues through which trainees could become involved with social justice. Additionally, there was no baseline established regarding the attitudes of participants prior to their involvement to the study. Future research should compare prior attitudes toward working with marginalized populations and engaging in social justice activities with insights gained from practicum experiences.

The voluntary nature of the study and the purposeful recruitment may impose some selection bias. Furthermore, the heterogeneity in the content and population of the groups (children, adults, older adults) may contribute to lack of homogeneity in our results. Future research should explore groups that are similar in terms of content or population in order to

better understand the impact of exposure on the social justice attitudes of trainees.

In addition, participants in this study were not asked about their own experiences with oppression and marginalized areas of identity, such as SES, religion, generational status, and sexual orientation, which may have impacted their attitudes toward social justice and working with community members. Our sample was also fairly homogeneous with regard to race/ethnicity. A broadly diverse sample might have yielded greater variation in responses and would likely provide more information about how personal identities contribute to the development of social justice attitudes in counseling trainees. Future research should include diverse members of the trainee community and should explore how diverse, intersectional identities, and experiences with oppression, contribute to social justice interest, commitment and competency.

Furthermore, members were also interviewed in groups, and although every attempt was made by the researchers to create an open, non-judgemental environment (such as having members in each group that had different experiences, not including supervising professors in the group, and ensuring confidentiality), some group members may have felt pressured to make comments that they perceived to be socially desirable. Further research should utilize individual interviews with participants that capture how personal experiences with oppression and intercultural relationships affected their approach and attitudes toward working with marginalized groups in community settings.

Finally, this study did not explore the nature and direct impact of supervision. Although Killian (2001) stated that all supervision should be multicultural, the extent to which competency is explored and encouraged can certainly vary from supervisor to supervisor. Different supervisors and supervision styles may have influenced the attitudes of trainees and thus affected

our findings. For this reason, further research should address the impact of supervision on trainee self-efficacy in working with marginalized populations. Supervision should be focused on helping students develop pragmatic skills and foster their interest in social justice work. Finally, future research should examine whether involvement in community-based group work can increase commitment to social justice work.

Conclusion

Clinical training involving group work with marginalized populations appears to play a role in developing awareness of social justice issues, and in developing a systemic conceptualization of mental health issues. Helping trainees gain practical skills and effectiveness as counselors, while working with diverse community groups, is essential. Counselor training programs should emphasize effective supervision with trainees who facilitate psycho-educational and/ or psychotherapy groups with marginalized populations. An increased emphasis on supervision may help trainees better manage feelings of discouragement resulting from the systemic barriers faced by disenfranchised populations. Skilled and focused multicultural supervision is essential for providing trainees with encouragement throughout the training process. Expanded research exploring the impact of social justice-focused supervision on group counseling with marginalized populations would represent a positive step toward further bolstering a social advocacy orientation; an essential component of counselor identity.

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