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## Multicultural and Social Justice Training in Doctoral Counseling Programs: A Phenomenological Study

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# Multicultural and Social Justice Training in Doctoral Counseling Programs: A Phenomenological Study

## Abstract

Multicultural and social justice are central values of the counseling profession. However, it is unclear how doctoral training advances counselor education students' multicultural and social justice competence and what deficits might exist. The researchers addressed this gap by conducting a phenomenological study of multicultural and social justice training experiences with ten doctoral counselor education students. The researchers identified three themes: limited multicultural integration, methods of compensation, and experiencing growth. The researchers also identified subthemes that explained how doctoral students prepared themselves to be multicultural and social justice competent through self-study, collaborative learning, and role-taking experiences despite often perceiving gaps in their coursework. Finally, the researchers discuss implications and suggestions for future research.

## Keywords

multicultural training, counselor education, doctoral students, social justice, multicultural counseling

## Author's Notes

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Multiculturalism and social justice are considered core values of the counseling profession (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). The Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC; Sue et al., 1992) and subsequent Multicultural and Social Justice competencies (MCSJCC; Ratts et al., 2016) have made clear the need to train counselors to competently address multicultural and social justice issues in counseling. Already, there is a wide body of literature concerning pedagogical strategies to enhance the multicultural and social justice competence of counselor trainees (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Chan et al., 2018; Decker et al., 2016; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2011) and their qualitative experiences in multicultural counseling courses (Hoover & Morrow, 2016; Seward, 2014). However, while the topic of multicultural and social justice competency has been researched extensively with master's level students, there is a lack of research on the multicultural social justice training and competence of *doctoral students* in counselor education and supervision (CES) programs.

Counselor educators hold an outsized role in the development of multicultural competency within the profession of counseling. In particular relation to the MCSJ competencies, one may point to the ways in which counselor educators routinely have the opportunity to work through the 6 components of counseling and advocacy interventions in their professional capacities: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, public policy, and international and global affairs interventions (MCSJCC, Ratts et al., 2016, Section IV). As an example, a counselor educator may at once “employ quantitative and qualitative research to highlight inequities present in current counseling literature and practices in order to advocate for systemic changes to the profession” (MCSJ, Section IV, Subsection A), “conduct multicultural and social justice based research to highlight the inequities that social institutions have on marginalized clients and that benefit privileged clients” (Section IV, Subsection C), and “utilize research to examine how

international and global affairs impact privileged and marginalized clients” (Section IV, Subsection F) in a single research project conducted with the MCSJ competencies as a core component of hypothesis creation and subsequent inquiry. Further study on how counselor educators are given their multicultural training may have a direct impact on the future fulfillment of many of the MCSJ competency standards.

The training standards established by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP; 2016) dictate doctoral programs require training in culturally relevant teaching, supervision, advocacy, research, and leadership strategies. Additionally, the ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* necessitates counselor educators infuse multicultural content into all coursework. However, despite the existence of CACREP and ACA standards directing the incorporation of culturally relevant strategies in doctoral student training, there is substantial latitude given to programs in how specific standards are met (Sink & Lemich, 2018).

The latitude inherent to the application of the standards at the doctoral level, in conjunction with the dearth of research leaves it unclear what doctoral students typically experience regarding their multicultural and social justice training. We contend that this is a critical gap in the research given the significant role doctoral students play as future educators, supervisors, and researchers. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of doctoral-level students enrolled in counselor education programs in regards to their multicultural and social justice training. We will begin with a review of previous research on multicultural and social justice training in counseling programs, and then present the methodology and findings of a phenomenological investigation with ten doctoral CES students.

### **Multicultural Training in CES**

Scholars have identified several effective strategies for promoting the multicultural competence of master's students such as cultural immersion (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2011), personal growth groups (Rowell & Benshoff, 2008), service-learning experiences (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Midgett et al., 2016), and multicultural and social justice-oriented practicum experiences (Hoover & Morrow, 2016; Kou et al., 2020). Researchers have also found that the infusion of multicultural and social justice content throughout the curriculum is more effective than covering the subject in a single course. For example, Decker (2013) observed that trainees who received greater advocacy training throughout their master's programs reported greater social justice advocacy competence and more likelihood to advocate across the individual, community, and societal levels. Similarly, in a sample of school counselors, participants who attended programs where multiculturalism was infused throughout their programs reported greater multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills than those who reported taking a single multicultural class (Dameron et al., 2020). Despite the importance of infusing multicultural and social justice training, it has been found that many master's students continue to report that the majority of their training was within a single course and the emphasis was on awareness and knowledge, rather than the attainment of multicultural counseling skills, social justice tenets, and advocacy skills (Collins et al., 2015).

Researchers have also observed experiences of marginalization among students of color in counselor education programs. For example, in qualitative studies, students of color have reported experiences of isolation, tokenization, differential levels of support, and perceiving the curriculum as lacking culturally relevant material (Haskins et al., 2013; Seward, 2014). Overall, these findings point to the need for counselor educators to facilitate meaningful classroom discussions related to multiculturalism, to speak from real-world experience about social justice issues (e.g.

discrimination), and to provide proactive support (e.g. mentoring) to students of color (Haskins et al., 2013; Seward, 2014). Unfortunately, there is a general lack of research concerning the preparation of doctoral students, with the extant literature focusing primarily on preparing doctoral students to teach (Barrio Minton et al., 2018).

### **Doctoral Training in CES**

Scholars have noted several gaps in the training and preparedness of doctoral students in CES programs (Magnuson, 2002; Sink & Lemich, 2018). For example, previous research suggests that many beginning counselor educators feel underprepared as teachers due to a lack of structured opportunities and teacher-related training at the doctoral level (Buller, 2013; Magnuson, 2002; Waalkes et al., 2018). This is especially concerning as it relates to the teaching of multicultural courses and content which may require heightened skill and sensitivity on the part of CES instructors (Yoon et al., 2014). Part of this problem may be due to the great variability in how CACREP programmatic standards are met in counselor education programs (Arcuri, 2016; Sink & Lemich, 2018). For example, during the internship phase, doctoral students may receive supervision in three of the five core areas which include: counseling, teaching, supervision, research, and scholarship, and/or leadership and advocacy (CACREP, 2016). This means one student may choose to complete their internship co-teaching a multicultural counseling course while another completes their internship completing research on program evaluation data. In this example, the activities of each internship would afford the students different opportunities to reflect and grow in the area of multicultural and social justice competence.

Additionally, the coursework and learning activities in doctoral programs may differ widely from program to program based on the program's mission and emphasis on doctoral standards, syllabi details, and instructors' teaching styles (Arcuri, 2016). While CES instructors

may be required to integrate culturally relevant content across doctoral-level courses, CES instructors may differ in their level of motivation to engage doctoral students in coursework, reflective discussions, and immersion experiences focused on multicultural and social justice issues. Also, CACREP does not specify best practices to address culturally responsive and social justice content and assess the multicultural development of students (CACREP, 2016). Consequently, many faculty members may base students' development on perceptions and shared norms, which may not effectively or intentionally assess the multicultural competence of doctoral students.

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

Since multicultural counseling is a vital component of counseling, counselor education programs need to provide quality multicultural counseling training to enhance the multicultural and social justice competence of counselors (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2016). However, the current literature on multicultural training only focuses on master's level students, and there has been limited attention given to doctoral students. Therefore, this study focuses on the experience of doctoral counseling students with multicultural and social justice training in their doctoral programs. With the results of this study, counselor educators will be able to develop their understanding of the needs of doctoral counseling students on multicultural and social justice training and enhance their training and curriculums for doctoral students.

### **Method**

Transcendental Phenomenology originated with the work of Husserl in descriptive phenomenology (Husserl, 1913/1962). The concept of transcendental phenomenology was later expanded from theory to research application by Moustakas, who focused on Husserl's concept of epoche (Husserl, 1913/1962; Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology allows

researchers to uncover the essence of the lived experience through bracketing, horizontalization, intentionality, and phenomenological reduction (Giogi & Giogi, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). Consequently, we used a transcendental phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of doctoral students' lived experiences of multicultural-social justice training in doctoral-level CES programs (Moustakas, 1994). This qualitative approach allowed us to (a) explore how doctoral students perceive the quality of their multicultural and social justice training on an individual level and (b) to understand common experiences among doctoral students in regards to their advancement of multicultural and social justice competence.

### **Research Team**

The research team consisted of four doctoral students in CES, one doctoral student in education, policy, planning, and leadership (EPPL), and one associate professor in CES. The members of the research team had diverse cultural backgrounds. The first author identifies as White, Jewish, cisgender, male, the second author identifies as an African American cisgender female, the third author identifies as an Asian, cisgender female, the fourth author identifies as a Black, heterosexual male, the fifth author identifies as a South Asian American, cisgender female, and the sixth author identifies as a White cisgender male. The first, third, fourth, and fifth authors were responsible for the interviewing and transcribing of the data. The first, second, third, fourth, and fifth authors coded the data individually and collaboratively leading to the identification of themes. Finally, all authors were involved in the writing and editing of the article.

### **Participants**

The researchers recruited doctoral students in CES programs in the U.S. Purposive and criterion sampling was used to identify information-rich cases (Creswell, 2014). Participants were eligible to participate if they were currently enrolled in a CACREP accredited doctoral program



and/or had graduated from a CACREP-accredited program within the last two years. After obtaining IRB approval, participants were solicited through a list-serve email to CESNET-L. In total, 10 participants met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. According to Moustakas (1994), 6-15 participants with similar experience and relatively homogenous participant characteristics are recommended for phenomenological research, thus this sample met the requirement. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 55 with an average age of ( $M=39, s=11.02$ ). The majority of the participants identified as White ( $n=7$ ), two identified as African American, and one identified as multiracial (African American and Puerto Rican). The majority of the participants were female ( $n=7$ ) and two participants self-identified as male. Additionally, one participant self-identified as Queer. To ensure confidentiality, the research team used pseudonyms throughout the research process.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures**

The research team used a transcendental phenomenological interview approach, which consisted of open-ended questions and probes that allowed the researchers to solicit in-depth data from the participants' responses (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were conducted according to the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and lasted 50-60 minutes.

The researchers utilized Moustakas' (1994) modification of Van Kamm's transcendental phenomenological approach to data analysis. The processes we followed included: (a) *epoché*, bracketing the personal judgments, assumptions, and understandings; (b) phenomenological reduction, developing a textural description of the essence of the phenomenon; (c) imaginative variation, presenting a picture of the complexities that make up an experience, and (d) synthesizing the data to develop a comprehensive statement of the whole phenomenon.

Specifically, the researchers began this process by bracketing personally held values and beliefs.

The research team used three phenomenological reduction processes to identify themes (Moustakas, 1994). First, the team identified initial groupings through horizontalization, where we listed every expression related to the participants' experience with a corresponding code. Second, we engaged in reduction and elimination, through consensus coding, which involved five members of the research team meeting and reviewing the data and codes (Moustakas, 1994); specifically, this encompassed reading and rereading text together, consistently moving between the text and code, coding, rereading, and recoding. Consequently, we determined which thematic content was a new horizon or new dimension of the phenomenon. We then began conducting clustering and thematizing, culminating with translating thematic content into core themes about the participants' experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). The researchers determined saturation when no new codes or themes emerged in the data. Finally, the research team identified exemplary quotes (i.e., content that vividly illustrated the themes).

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure credibility, we attended to various aspects of trustworthiness (Hays & Singh, 2012). We used bracketing, triangulation of data sources, and research team members, as well as several levels of member checking. Member checking included the following methods: asking questions or restating responses throughout the interview to check for clarity of content; after interviews, each participant was read a verbal summary and was able to qualify, clarify, or correct any information that was provided; and lastly, we sent participants a copy of a transcript from their interview to review and make corrections.

The bracketing process looked different for each author. For the first author, a White male, this meant bracketing the many positive experiences they had in multicultural courses and recognizing how course content is often geared towards individuals with more privileged

identities. For the second author, bracketing encompassed exploring and acknowledging how they engaged with students of color as well as how they experienced invisibility during their curricular experiences as a Black woman, while also meeting with research team members to ensure that these did not influence the data collection and analysis processes. For the third author, an Asian female, it meant comparing participants' experiences to their own while also trying their best to focus on the participants and not allow my experience and any assumption to influence the results. For the fourth author, as a Black man, it meant being aware of cultural biases and work to not allow it to direct data collection and analysis. For the fifth author, bracketing included putting my own desires and assumptions of what a program or course should provide, especially in my own research areas of focus, and hearing the participants' voices and experiences. For the sixth and final author, bracketing involved putting aside assumptions about what social justice training could or should look like when working with graduate students.

## **Findings**

The researchers identified three central themes, which describe the experiences of doctoral students regarding their training in multiculturalism and social justice. The themes that emerged included: limited multicultural integration, methods of compensation, and growth experiences. In addition to these three central themes, we also identified six subthemes, which illuminated the complexities of the experiences related to multicultural and social justice training in doctoral programs. Pseudonyms are used throughout the presentation of the findings.

### **Limited Multicultural Integration**

A central theme that emerged among the majority of the participants (n=8), was that multiculturalism was not integrated to a sufficient degree in their doctoral program. Participants described how they anticipated a heightened level of multicultural and social justice training at the

doctoral level but often felt that their training did not live up to that. Two subthemes emerged from these descriptions: “checking the box” and “outdated” perspectives.

### *Checking the Box*

While all of the participants (N=10) remarked that professors attempted to infuse multicultural training into their program, many participants (60%, n=6) felt that faculty were just attempting to “check the box” and that it wasn’t infused sufficiently throughout the program. Participants described how it often felt like faculty included multicultural course content as a “burden” or “requirement” rather than seeing it as “ethical part of counseling.” For instance, participants described how courses on subjects like teaching and supervision, included chapters on multiculturalism, but that it wasn’t included beyond that unless brought up by students. According to Dianne, multiculturalism and social justice were not a true focus of her program:

There really was not a great amount of emphasis on multicultural anything unless we brought it to the courses...same would go with social justice, whether social justice practices in education and curriculum and development, incorporating cultural issues into curriculum and instruction, it really wasn't something that was a major focus. The major focus was on theory development and development of professional identity as an educator, so that's where it was limited.

In addition, the multicultural content offered failed to advance the knowledge base of participants, especially individuals with clinical and/or research interests in multicultural issues. In regards to her multicultural class, Hannah said, “I really basically thought that I came into that course with more clinical experience than was added to.” For both Rachel and Dianne, it was evident that their courses were not a priority based on the disorganization of the classes and the fact that they weren’t taught by core faculty. According to Rachel,

The faculty member that taught them wasn't very organized. There wasn't a coherent overall objective to the course. It was just this haphazard, like, we're doing this because we have to. And it felt very much like a little bump up from a Master's level course rather than actually looking at us going out as future counselor educators, in terms of how are we going to do this ourselves?

All of the participants desired a deeper exploration of multicultural and social justice issues, which were not always met by their coursework. As Bryan described "it's infused, but not always critically infused" meaning, that "there's a lot of teaching directed towards people with privileged identities" rather than exploring "critical issues such as the deportation of children being taken away from their family, the current Me-Too movement, Queer issues, and Black Lives Matter issues."

### *Outdated Perspectives*

Many participants felt that their professors held "outdated perspectives" in relation to multiculturalism, most notably not including a focus on social justice advocacy and intersectionality. This was especially perceived by students who desired to incorporate social justice into their work but did not see their faculty engaging in that work. According to Emma,

I like all of the faculty I just think they have a perspective that is outdated so um, when it comes to multiculturalism, so they understand it, they want to make changes they want to do things differently but there's isn't anything being done differently...and it's like a slight disappointment because you hear it from them, but you don't see it happening.

Outdated perspectives also affected classroom experiences. Hannah described how her course syllabus and textbooks were "full of outdated information and inappropriate comments." Bryan

described how professors challenged the existence of multicultural constructs such as microaggressions and devalued multicultural-focused scholarship:

There was also another incident where a person was presenting on their current research topic they were going to a conference on focused solely on Black people and another instructor said ugh, not word for word, but this is an issue because you're solely focused on Black people and Black issues and if you want there to be uptake you need there to be some White people who can attend otherwise it's going to be hard for you to get a job or people won't attend your session or people aren't going to learn and grow.

In this instance, the professor indicated not only an outdated perspective, but a microaggression that sent a harmful message to doctoral students. In contrast to these experiences, one participant, Kenny described an atmosphere where faculty modeled multicultural and social justice competence through their focus on scholarship and advocacy. In regards to the impact of professors, Kenny shared:

I think they were really intentional about it. You know, I don't think we ever questioned any ground rules. I think going in the expectations were pretty clear that we were going to talk about social justice or we're going to talk about difficult issues and the professors brought themselves, you know, (the professor) was a great example, when she came to class she shared about her own experiences and so she modeled that courage ... and then it gives you permission to do the same thing.

In this quote, Kenny shared the value of having a professor who could model engagement in social justice and the effect that had on classroom experiences. Unfortunately, most participants in this study did not have such experiences.

## **Methods of Compensation**

All of the participants (N=10) described the importance of attending to multicultural and social justice issues in their training. Because of this interest, participants sought out opportunities to learn about multicultural counseling issues and become involved in social justice work. Additionally, many students described how they found opportunities to compensate for perceived gaps in their learning through self-directed learning and collaborative learning.

### ***Self-Directed Learning***

As a response to perceived gaps in their training, many participants took it upon themselves to delve deeper into learning about multicultural issues. As described by Hannah, “I really just trained myself by learning about different cultures and different individuals, different religions etc.” Bryan described greatly benefiting from taking classes “outside of counseling and counselor education such as critical foundations of education” which were taught by professors who specialized in critical theory. These classes allowed Bryan to broaden his perspective on social justice perspectives beyond what is typically found in many counseling programs. Rachel described compensating for topics not covered or addressed in her program by seeking out training through “workshops and conferences.” Further, participants described how research and dissertation experiences were used as a vehicle for learning more about multicultural and social justice issues. As described by Dianne who used her dissertation research to study issues related to people living with disabilities: “Based on the program itself I don't think it prepared me very well. I think my dissertation research prepared me more than anything else.”

### ***Collaborative Learning***

In addition to participants describing how their own initiative led them to seek out individual learning experiences, participants also described how advances in multicultural learning

were often a group effort. Several participants described the influence of student-led discussions to this effect. As described by Monica,

Our doc program is much like, we facilitate it. It's tough, but it occurs in a lot of our courses. So, we instruct everyone and each of our cohorts has their own awareness and insight of multiculturalism and so it always comes into the classroom, because we're a group that does it.

Similarly, Kenny described learning a great deal from members of his cohort. He described his cohort as having "a great blending of perspectives" due to cohort members of different ages, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. He described how there was a sense of safety that allowed deep exploration into pressing issues related to social justice such as racism, police brutality, and economic inequality. As described by Kenny:

Being in a cohort model, I was surrounded by the most inspiring classmates and we had a lot of, you know, mutual respect and compassion for each other, they were patient with me, we were all at different developmental levels...in retrospect, they taught me an incredible amount.

In addition to having meaningful conversations, participants also described collaborative learning through classroom projects and teaching experiences. Rachel described how she and her fellow doctorate students infused their group supervision class with multiculturalism.

Yeah. I think really a lot of ... my own preparation came from working with fellow doc students and collaboration of doing group supervision for practicum and internship, and ... and choosing to integrate that as a focus within the group supervision, with the other doc students that I worked with. But it wasn't really coming from faculty, it was coming from



us in terms of always asking the students what multicultural considerations do you have with the client and what's happening here?

Taken together, these participants indicated how dialogue and collaboration were critical components in their efforts to grow into culturally competent counselor educators.

### **Experiencing Growth**

All of the participants reported some level of growth in regards to their multicultural and social justice competence, and preparation to infuse multiculturalism into their work as counselor educators. These perceptions of experiencing growth were coded into sub-themes of role-taking experiences and continual journey.

#### ***Role-Taking Experiences***

For many of the participants, role-taking experiences were perceived as some of the most growth-promoting experiences of their doctoral programs. Participants endorsed a wide variety of roles during their doctoral program which included acting as a supervisor to master's students, teaching courses, working in research labs, counseling clients through internship experiences, serving in other administrative roles, and acting as advocates through community-based organizations. The majority of participants tried to infuse their roles with multicultural and social justice content even when internships weren't expressly social justice-focused. This was a source of learning and empowerment for many of the participants. For example, Kenny described two powerful role-taking experiences as part of his doctoral program: volunteering as a counselor in an HIV-clinic and teaching courses to master's students. In the interview, Kenny described one powerful moment when teaching masters students,

I was teaching a group of students who had just entered a master's program and they apparently had a really big falling out over the topic of race, like the day before in a

different class. And so, thank God, if I were entering that environment, that backdrop if you will, not having had the wealth of experience in our cohort and in the clinic, I think, I probably would have tried to make everything nice or avoid it through my own discomfort, but instead, I was like oh okay rather than talk about what we're going to talk about today, let's talk about that, and maybe how it relates to what we're going to talk about. Just put it all out there, you know... It was a day I'll never forget, I mean, there were tears shed, but it was safe and respectful and it was, um, a true teaching moment.

Role-taking experiences allowed participants to fortify their identities as future counselor educators who prioritize multicultural and social justice competence. Emma described dealing with frustration throughout her program, but gained a sense of hope, as she started teaching and supervising master's students. She described how it was fulfilling and growth-promoting to address diversity issues in supervision:

I have, one example, this was a White female counseling student in practicum, and her client was coming in for therapy because of lots of discrimination and, the client was saying she's the only African American female in one of her classes and she really feels left out in a lot of different situations...so we had a conversation about [the counseling student's] experience with that and then also about what her client's experience was as well and how can they work together, or how does she help her client um be in a space where she feels comfortable to be able to share her experience.

In sum, participants shared how in role-taking experiences they were able to grow in their ability to apply multicultural and social justice perspectives and skills.

### ***Continual Journey***

Participants described their growth towards multiculturalism and social justice competence as “constantly evolving and changing” and an “ongoing effort.” While all of the participants felt prepared to integrate multiculturalism and social justice into their work as counselor educators, they also needed to continue learning in the field. As noted by Bryan,

I will never be done. I have a lot more to learn about a variety of different cultures and ways to more effectively and developmentally teach issues. Whether that be a course on it or just infusing it into every single class that you teach. So how do I feel, competent in my ability to learn how to find out information, I feel competent in my ability to ask.

In this vein, multiple participants noted the idea of “cultural humility,” which entails a continual process of learning and growing towards multicultural and social justice competence. Thus, while participants felt that they may have taken positive steps in learning how to teach multicultural issues or act as a social justice advocate, they also described the need to continue growing once they become faculty. Participants described the need to “be open and flexible to the needs of students” and “use their platform as a faculty to advocate for marginalized groups.”

### **Discussion**

The researchers highlighted the multicultural and social justice training experiences of doctoral students in CACREP programs. The findings show that the participants experienced limited multicultural integration and often felt the need to compensate for the lack of curricular experiences related to multiculturalism and social justice. The experiences of these participants are significant, as they reveal gaps that may exist in doctoral counselor education programs. The findings of this study were consistent with scholarship that suggests that multicultural and social justice experiences are severely lacking in the master’s counselor education experience and those that are incorporated merely serve to meet accreditation or ethical requirements, which faculty

quickly or superficially address and expeditiously move to the next topic (Collins et al, 2015; Haskins et al., 2013; Haskins et al., 2015; Seward, 2014). Further, these findings parallel other researchers' findings related to how multicultural and social justice competence development takes place, namely that it is a life-long endeavor and requires personal commitment (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2011). The findings also converge with research regarding faculty members' efficacy and knowledge related to multicultural and social justice issues (Brown-Rice et al., 2016; Decker, 2013; Haskins et al., 2015), highlighting the need for more faculty program training and support.

The findings also reveal that to offset these challenges students found extracurricular experiences (Smith et al., 2014; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014) and altered their programmatic expectations (Appling et al., 2018; Craddock et al., 2011). It is imperative to note the contradictory nature of several themes. While many participants indicated that the content in courses was lacking, they did feel as if the role-taking experiences within the programs allowed them the opportunity for critical development in the area of multiculturalism and social justice. While previous research has found no association between methods of teaching strategies and likelihood for social justice advocacy (Decker, 2013), this study points to the importance of experiential learning at the doctoral level. This aligns with previous research highlighting how role-taking experiences like teaching internships are correlated with doctoral students feeling more prepared to be counselor educators (Hunt & Gilmore, 2011). This is also the first study to demonstrate that despite CACREP's (2016) mandate to incorporate culturally relevant content throughout the curriculum, doctoral students often perceive this infusion as limited, outdated, and lacking sufficient depth. The second unique finding is that doctoral students compensated for the lack of multicultural and social justice by striving to find their own opportunities to grow and bringing a multicultural and social justice focus into whatever opportunities are offered. These acts of

compensation allow for their personal and professional growth, while also inadvertently normalizing the status quo.

### **Implications for Practice and Training**

Several implications emerge from the findings of this study that may assist counselor education doctoral students and programs. First, at the micro-level, doctoral students should be prepared to continue their multicultural and social justice competence development both inside and outside of the classroom. As the findings of this study suggest, future counselor educators learn best through role-taking experiences, and when experiences are not explicitly focused on social justice, doctoral students must bring this perspective in whatever way possible to their work. Additionally, this research suggests the importance of doctoral students taking multicultural-focused coursework from other disciplines outside of counseling and finding ways to develop their advocacy identity in their personal and professional lives. Additionally, when doctoral students perceive gaps in their multicultural and social justice training, they should be prepared to advocate for additional opportunities to discuss such subjects.

At the meso-level, this research has implications for counselor education programs. Counselor educators must infuse multicultural and social justice content throughout the doctoral curriculum in a way that is not superficial, but intentional as recommended at the master's level (Decker et al., 2016). One way of doing this would be training doctoral students in a counselor-scholar-advocate model, which provides a framework for viewing the interconnected roles of counselors in promoting social justice (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). This would entail empowering doctoral students to consider how they can use their roles as researchers, supervisors, and educators to advocate for social justice. Doctoral instructors should also connect these discussions to real-world sociopolitical issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement and combating the

oppression of LGBTQ+ communities. Counselor education programs can also ensure students have role-taking experiences by mandating that at least one doctoral internship should be focused on social justice via working at a clinic serving underserved populations, teaching a multicultural counseling class, or serving in an advocacy position.

Lastly, at the macro-level, it is imperative that the field of counseling as a whole continue to address disparities in educational opportunities for counselors with marginalized identities and ensure that all the multicultural and social justice competencies are being addressed in training (Ratts et al., 2016). As described in this study, many faculty members may have outdated perspectives as it relates to multiculturalism and social justice. Consequently, current faculty in counselor education may need guidance in the form of curriculum standards from accrediting and professional organizations such as CACREP and ACA that require faculty to take part in professional development related to emerging concepts and theories (e.g., Whiteness, cultural humility, intersectionality, microaggressions, critical race theory, etc.). Also, universities should examine outcomes related to these constructs to ensure that a box is not merely being checked but meaningful teaching and learning are happening for doctoral students (Potts & Schlichting, 2011). Additionally, CACREP and ACA are also advised to strengthen requirements for multicultural and social justice training at the doctoral level. (i.e., mandating social justice focused field-experiences)

### **Limitations**

This study sheds light on the experiences of doctoral students' multicultural and social justice curricular experiences; however, it is important to note there were several limitations. While we had over almost 200 pages of transcripts, the data were collected from one data source (i.e., individual interviews) thus credibility of the findings could have been increased with the

addition of artifact data (e.g., course syllabus, exit program data) or inclusion of faculty perspectives. Further, the majority of the participants were White; a study conducted with all students of color or international students may have different responses. For example, Koch and colleagues (2018) indicated that their participants, primarily students of color, focused on the characteristics of faculty and their willingness to be social justice advocates and allies; a finding that did not emerge from this study. Also, the age of the participants varied widely, which may have impacted the findings. The final limitation includes the data collection process because the use of multiple interviewers may have impeded the dependability of the data as different interviewers may have probed differently. However, weekly research team meetings to review and discuss interview engagement helped to mitigate any noted differences.

### **Future Research**

Additional studies specifically exploring faculty perspectives or programmatic best practices would add depth to this study's findings. In addition, it may be helpful to conduct studies that include artifacts and focus groups, to triangulate the findings and decrease the reliance on one data source to understand the phenomenon. It may be useful to explore the experiences of students of color or other marginalized populations to better ascertain the complexities of the multicultural and social justice curriculum experiences in doctoral programs. While this study did not specifically look at the type of institution, it may be illuminating to understand if and how this experience differs at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and online programs. Time in program was not something that was considered in this study, thus future studies should consider this variable as it may be important to understand how those differences influence how students experience this aspect of their curriculum. Additionally, due to the topic, we know that students

who agreed to participate may have an affinity for multicultural and social justice and that interest may influence the findings. In the future, it may be helpful to conduct a case study examination, where we focus on gathering data from specific institutions to better understand the entire essence of the phenomenon.

### **Conclusion**

Given the role of doctoral students as future educators and leaders in the field of counseling, it is paramount to consider their training in multiculturalism and social justice. In this study, the researchers found that doctoral students felt by and large that their training had many deficiencies in addressing multiculturalism and social justice. However, they also reported that they were able to compensate for these gaps through their own efforts via self-study, role-taking experiences, and collaboration with peers. Our findings support the need to reconsider the training of doctoral students in counselor education and design curricula that foster greater opportunities for the development of multicultural and social justice competence. Future research should further seek to uncover what methods are most effective for ensuring the development of multicultural and social justice competence among doctoral students.



## Appendix A

### Research Questions

1. What is your clinical and educational background? How many years of clinical experience do you have?
2. What program are you in or did you graduate from?
3. What does “multicultural competence” mean to you? What does social justice mean to you?
4. What obligations do you have as a counselor educator at the doctoral level or in your current position? How were you prepared to be multiculturally competent to fulfill the obligations?
5. Have any of your course material addressed teaching/counseling/supervising/research from a multicultural/social justice focus?
  1. Did you take any specific courses in multiculturalism/social justice at the doctorate level?
  2. Was it infused throughout your program?
6. Have you had any specific experiences in your doctoral program that prepared you to be culturally competent counselor educator and to engage in social justice?
7. How well do you feel your program prepared you to be a multiculturally competent counselor educator/counselor?
  1. What non-scholastic experiences have prepared you?
8. Have you had any experience on teaching courses related to multicultural counseling or infused it? How do you feel about it? Has there been any challenge?
9. What part of the training provided by your doctoral program related to multiculturalism and social justice do you find helpful?
10. Are there any improvements that could be made to your program to enhance your ability to serve in your capacity from a multicultural/social justice perspective?
11. How has going through a doctorate program impacted your views on multiculturalism/social justice?
12. How important is multicultural and social justice competence to you as a (future) counselor educator?
13. What is your age?
14. How do you identify racially/ethnically?
15. How do you identify by gender?
16. Are there any other identities that are salient for you?

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