Experience of Underrepresented Students in Master's-Level Counselor Education Programs

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological investigation was to understand the racial and ethnic experiences of underrepresented Master's-level counseling graduate students in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs. The second author conducted semi-structured interviews with six masters-level counseling graduate students. Data analysis revealed four composite themes that comprised students' experience. The themes were: *Perceived Cultural Competence, Individual Characteristics, Connection and Advocacy, and Bringing "It" Up.* Implications on how counselor education programming and curriculum can provide support for underrepresented students are provided.

Recent statistics show racial and ethnic diversity continuously growing in the United States over the last decade (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Yet historically underrepresented graduate student populations (i.e., African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics or Chicanos/Latinos, and Native Americans) remain marginalized at institutions of higher education. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines an underrepresented population as, "a subgroup of the population whose representation is disproportionately low relative to their numbers in the general population" (U.S. Department of Health, n.d., Glossary, para. 1). In part, this discrepancy is due to a long history of systemic and institutionalized racism in the country. Counselor education (CE) programs have made efforts to mitigate injustices against historically underrepresented groups through social justice advocacy and the accruement and retention of marginalized students (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020).

Underrepresented counselor education graduate students experience a unique set of challenges associated with race and culture, which can lead to undue stress in a program that is already mentally and emotionally challenging (Baker & Moore, 2015; Barker, 2016; Henfield et al., 2011; Henfield et al., 2013; Rose Merrell-James et al., 2020; Zeligman et al., 2015). In a phenomenological study, Walsh et al. (2021) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, underrepresented graduate students reported challenges associated with finances, availability of resources, and additional family responsibilities. African American students face challenges related to isolation and disconnection from peers due in part to having very few peers who look like them (Henfield et al., 2013). Underrepresented graduate student attrition rates have been attributed to faculty members' cultural competence, students' ability to feel safe expressing their intersecting identities, and the students' personal and academic support networks (Baker & Moore, 2015).

In a study conducted by Bertrand (2021), White clinical supervisors were perceived by supervisees as uneasy and/or aggravated in clinical supervision when discussing topics related to race and culture. Bertrand makes apparent the destructive power that racism in graduate programs can have, which includes denying students' lived experiences, which can leave them feeling isolated and alone.

Added to this is the influx of international students entering into counselor education programs (Lau et al., 2018). As of 2018, there were more than one million international students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2019). International graduate students face unique challenges compared to their domestic counterparts. They may not have familiarity regarding the political and cultural climate of the country (i.e., history of racial oppression), which could increase acculturation stress and the possibility of mental health concerns such as anxiety and/or depression (Lau et al., 2018).

Understanding the experiences of underrepresented students in CE programs is essential for programming and curriculum. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) standards indicate that, "*counselor education programs make systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students and to create and support an inclusive learning community"* (p. 4)*.* In order to provide an equitable and inclusive environment, counselor educators must understand the unique set of challenges that historically underrepresented students face.

While several studies have examined the experiences of underrepresented doctoral students in CE (Baker & Moore, 2015; Barker, 2016; Henfield et al., 2011; Henfield et al., 2013; Rose Merrell-James et al., 2020; Zeligman et al., 2015), few have focused on masters-level students. Masters-level counseling graduate students make up the majority of enrollment in CACREP-

accredited counselor education programs (CACREP, 2018). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the racial and ethnic experiences of underrepresented master's-level counseling graduate students in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs.

Method

The focus of phenomenological research is to understand the essence of participants' lived experience (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological studies are designed to discover the core meaning of a phenomenon in a specific time and place, while respecting the unique panoply of human experience (Wertz, 2005). Phenomenological research was selected for this study to gain a holistic picture of underrepresented graduate students' racial and ethnic experiences while enrolled in CACREP-accredited Masters-level Counselor Education programs in the United States.

Procedures

After receiving institutional review board approval (IRB), the first and third author reached out to key informants. Key informants included counselor education faculty members in CACREP-accredited counseling programs who might know of persons eligible to participate in this study. Once participants were identified, the second author emailed potential participants with a recruitment script containing informed consent documentation and a demographics questionnaire. Six students volunteered to participate in the study. The second author conducted one semi-structured interview with each of the six participants. Interviews were conducted over a three-month period (May 2021 – July 2021) and ranged in duration from 22 to 32 minutes in length.

The second author identifies as part of an underrepresented racial group and at the time of data collection, was a master's-level graduate student in a CACREP-accredited counselor education program. The decision was made to have the second author conduct interviews to help

the participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with a peer, as opposed to a counselor education faculty member. The interview protocol began with the question, "Tell me about your experience as an underrepresented student in a CACREP-accredited counselor education master's program." In addition to the opening question, the first and second author created a series of follow up questions to help participants describe their racial and ethnic experiences and asked additional questions to clarify information as needed. Examples of follow-up questions included, "What did you find helpful (i.e., courses, course standards, instructors, advisors, workshops, etc.)?" and "What was not helpful (i.e., courses, course standards, instructors, advisors, workshops, etc.)?"

Participants

Six masters-level counseling graduate students (ages 22-43) volunteered to participate in this study. All participants, at the time of interview, were enrolled as a master's-level counseling graduate student in a CACREP-accredited programs located in one of two regions of the United States. As outlined by the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES, n.d.), the two regions comprised North Atlantic and Southern. Of the six participants, 3 identified as male and 3 as female. Participants identified culturally (which may include nationality, race, ethnicity) as African American, Southeast Asian, Indian, Korean American, Trinidadian American, and Asian American. The following pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities: Darren, Alexis, Mia, Josh, Ed, and Melissa (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Information, Self-Described by Participants

Pseudonym	Cultural Identity	Age	Gender
Darren	African American		Male
Alexis	Southeast Asian	30	Female
Mia	Indian	22	Female
Josh	Korean American		Male
Ed	Trinidadian American	33	Male
Melissa	Asian American	43	Female

Data Analysis

Data was transcribed and analyzed by the first and second authors. The researchers used the following four techniques to build trustworthiness: (a) *epoché*, (b) member checking, (c) peer review, and (d) using rich, thick descriptions of participants' experiences. *Epoché* (also called bracketing) was used by the first and second authors to identify potential biases and assumptions regarding the phenomenon in order to begin the research with a more open state of mind (Moustakas, 1994). The second method to strengthen trustworthiness, member checking, offered each participant the chance to review verbatim transcript and offer revision if needed. The first and second author transcribed the interviews and conducted preliminary data analyses for each participant. Individual transcriptions were sent to each participant for review, providing each participant the opportunity to confirm that the material was understood by researchers as it was intended.

Peer review included the first and second author reading transcripts and identifying themes individually and then meeting to agree on composite themes together. In addition to the first and second author's analysis, the data were also examined by peer review. The third author provided a comprehensive peer-review of the transcripts and composite themes. The last method, use of

rich, thick descriptions, researchers constructed meaning of the participants' racial and ethnic experiences through prolonged time with the data and member checking.

Data analysis protocol was aligned with a basic phenomenological research approach (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018), including identifying significant statements, horizontalization, and identifying composite themes across participant transcripts (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Overarching themes were identified from participants' significant statements with each transcript. Composite themes were considered significant if four or more participants shared them in their interview. Composite themes represent the researchers' interpretation of participants' racial and ethnic experience in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs.

Results

Across the six participants, four overarching themes emerged, along with corresponding subthemes (see Table 2). Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identity and exemplar statements highlight themes and subthemes. The four overarching themes of *perceived cultural competence, individual characteristics, connection and advocacy, and bringing "it" up* capture the essence of participants' racial and ethnic experience while enrolled in a Master's-level CACREP-accredited Counselor Education program.

Theme 1: Perceived Cultural Competence

As underrepresented students in predominantly White counselor education programs, participants' perceptions of their counselor education faculty members' cultural competence influenced their experience in the classroom, with faculty, advisors, and peers. Mia and Josh described concerns regarding a faculty member's cultural competence in relation to the faculty member's White privilege. For example, Mia stated, "I don't think they [White faculty] would understand [underrepresented experience] completely because they're not part of the minority

group." Similarly, Josh reported, "They [faculty of color] just understand more of the issues and glass ceilings that certain minorities have to break through to get respect from anyone."

Darren described the extra challenge of connecting with White faculty members who he understood to have different racial and ethnic experiences than him. Darren reported:

If you saw someone that looks like you, you're going to probably connect more with them on a deeper level. Not that it's holding me back from connecting with my professors. Our experiences are just not the same, like I've grown up a certain way, a certain color. And they've grown up a certain way, a certain color, and there's nothing wrong with that. I have to keep in mind that they're there for my best interest. I can open up to them about anything that I have, but it's just not the same.

Along the same lines, Melissa reported feeling more connected to her faculty advisor as an individual from an underrepresented population, "That's why I say that having a faculty advisor that was African American made it easier. She [faculty advisor] could understand that there is this sense of injustice or prejudice that maybe someone else wouldn't get. Or would have to imagine to understand."

Although participants identified the extra challenges associated with being an underrepresented student in a predominantly White university, they also identified the more culturally competent they felt their faculty to be, the more connected and secure they felt to participate in their classroom environment. Josh stated, "I think if the professor is mindful enough and is culturally aware themselves then I think it can be done in an effective manner that does not prohibit the personal growth of students." Alexis also reported that a culturally competent faculty member, "makes me feel like I am able to be in an environment where I am supported and also gives me strength to speak more."

Alexis identified feeling "supported" by instructors who were culturally competent. She described a culturally competent faculty as one who would be more curious about students' situations and who asks questions to better understand their experience. She reported that, "it feels like they [faculty] are interested in learning more about the way that someone else lives, their life, and experiences that may be different than theirs." Alexis talked about how faculty who demonstrate cultural competency, "creates space for more dialogue." On the other hand, Alexis felt that when faculty did not exhibit cultural competency, she felt that the conversation was ended, and her point of view was not heard, minimizing her felt sense of security in the classroom.

Mia described culturally competent faculty as ones who, "understand minority issues." She identified that faculty should better understand the issues of their student body, including those faced by international students who may not be as familiar with White American culture as their domestic student counterparts.

Theme 2: Individual Characteristics

Each participant discussed how individual characteristics such as gender, socio economic status, and cultural identity were part of their experience as underrepresented students in a counselor education program. Participants described their individual characteristics as both a challenge and a source of motivation in their CE program. Darren talked about the challenge of being the "only one" in his program stating, "I'm kind of used to being the only one [cultural identity], but I wish that we would see more representation of people that look like me." As a first-generation student, Melissa talked about challenges relating with other students, "we grew up in this culture [American], but we moved from another country and it's difficult to convey to some people because they don't understand that I can't do whatever I want. The fact that I can do certain things is because I fought against the culture that I grew up in." Along the same line, Alexis

described feeling isolated from her peers in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic stating, "so everyone experienced the pandemic, and we all experienced the losses and the interruption of our daily lives, but as an Asian American you've experienced that plus more on a different level that no one outside of your community can specifically relate to." Darren, Melissa, and Alexis all experienced challenges related to their cultural identity that were beyond those encountered by peers in their respective CE program.

In addition to challenges related to their individual characteristics, participants also found meaning as underrepresented students in their counselor education programs. Josh and Ed discussed how their individual characteristics helped them to build empathy, cultural sensitivity, and to become role models for other underrepresented populations. Josh stated, "Being a minority has kind of put me in the position where not only can I vouch for the betterment of mental health for everyone but I'm more sensitive to topics when it comes to underrepresented populations." Similarly, Ed talked about how his individual characteristics provide motivation to continue on his academic career path, "A young Black individual going to college to be a professor for the help of the people is great testimony and a great support beacon for all those who are trying to become better for themselves. That really motivates me to be a better student."

Theme 3: Connection and Advocacy

Participants discussed feeling connected to other underrepresented populations and described a desire to give back to the community. Melissa talked about feeling connected with other marginalized students. She stated, "We [underrepresented students] have similar experiences because of the way we look or whatever people assume about us. So yeah, there is some sort of extra connectedness among us, it's not a big population, but it'll do." Like Melissa, other participants described a connection with underrepresented individuals in their greater community

and a corresponding desire to advocate for their rights and access to mental health care. For example, Alexis stated,

> "I personally have not seen many counselors that may have a similar ethnic background to me so I wonder if that maybe opens more doors for clients who may look for someone to relate to more. At the same time, I know in my culture background that they don't really believe in counseling at all, so I could be that door opener for people who can relate to me and want to come to counseling."

Having discussed his own racial and ethnic experiences, Josh described feeling responsible to advocate for, "unrepresented populations all over the planet that are not advocated for and until everyone's treated more equally, I'm more hypersensitive to advocate for those populations." Alexis, Darren and Ed also talk about their experience as underrepresented counseling graduate students helping to advocate for future generations. Darren stated, "there's a sense of pride and I think to myself, alright, I'm here, I'm doing what I need to do, showing the next generations and showing even myself that I belong here." Similarly, Ed stated, "I believe that the knowledge that we're gaining applies to us, but I believe even more so for the future, to help other Races and other cultures, to really help."

Theme 4: Bringing "It" Up

As underrepresented students in CE programs, participants identified an additional challenge in their classroom experiences regarding talking about systemic and socio-political issues relating to their racial and ethnic experiences (a.k.a. bringing "It" up). While talking about her counselor education faculty members, Mia stated, "I don't think everyone [faculty] is comfortable talking about issues that are faced by people that are minoritized." Similarly, Mia reported, "I know some teachers run away from it and some teachers face it." Mia continued that

she worried, "If I bring up some differences or inequities, they'll [faculty] say like, oh, of course you'll bring it up, you're a person of color and I think that's one of the biggest challenges is bringing it up." Mia reported feeling "exhausted" that she had to take an "extra step" from her White peers to have issues of race and ethnicity addressed in the classroom.

Participants also described feeling as if others could not relate to their experiences of racism, which left them feeling isolated. For example, Alexis stated, "I had raised my hand once and had mentioned something and it was kind of like crickets and blank stares." Along the same lines, Melissa described, "when I brought it [issue of racial inequity] up and no one said anything I was like I'm not bringing it up again because I don't feel like wasting my time."

On the other hand, participants reported feeling secure in a classroom environment where they were not "singled out" as Josh describes, "I feel like a lot of the professors that I've had and a lot of the fellow classmates have never made me feel singled out. I think that I feel more than safe and comfortable at [University Affiliation]."

Table 2

Composite Themes of Racial and Ethnic Experience

- Composite Theme 1: Perceived Cultural Competence

- Composite Theme 2: Individual Characteristics

- Composite Theme 3: Connection and Advocacy

- Composite Theme 4: Bringing "It" Up

Discussion

There is a growing need for counselor educators to remain vigilant in strengthening their cultural competencies following the Covid-19 pandemic. The global pandemic has led to increased hate crimes against historically underrepresented groups, such as Asian Americans (Gover et al., 2020), and has led to an increase in the need for mental health professionals who are proficient in managing issues related to culture and race. Participants in this study discussed their racial and ethnic experiences in their CE programs in relation to their perception of faculty member's cultural competency, their individual characteristics (i.e., gender, socioeconomic status, culture), connection and advocacy, and bringing "it" up in the classroom.

ACA Code of Ethics (2014) discuss multicultural/diversity competencies in counselor education stating that, "Counselor educators actively train students to gain awareness, knowledge, and skills in the competencies of multicultural practice (American Counseling Association, 2014, Standard F.11.c). Participants described feeling more connected and secure in their courses when they felt their professors displayed cultural competency. A culturally competent counselor educator can employ their skills to improve students' self-efficacy, help supervisees connect cross-culturally with their clients, and improve the supervisory working alliance (Ratts et al, 2016). In the classroom, a culturally competent counselor educator can facilitate discussion regarding the racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences of students, vastly improving the quality of the learning experience for historically underrepresented students.

With the myriad of benefits for supervisees, students, and clients, it is essential that cultural competency, as well as social justice, advocacy, and anti-racist work, are present in counselor education curriculum and programming. Evaluating CE curriculum and programming is essential for maintaining a culturally sensitive, empowering, anti-racist, anti-oppressive environment for

students. Continuously implementing measures to strengthening CE program's faculty members cultural competency could improve the racial and ethnic experiences of underrepresented groups who may feel alienated in the classroom and from their own culture of origin.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations of the current study included a small sample size, interviews conducted via Zoom platform, and authors' personal biases. The study yielded a small sample size of six participants from two geographical regions, results may not be generalizable to other counselor education graduate students. Interviews were conducted via Zoom platform, and it is possible that students may respond to questions differently online as opposed to in-person.

Although measures were used to enhance trustworthiness, the first and third author do not identify as part of an underrepresented racial group and could have inadvertently imposed biases during data analysis. Future research could include replication studies with a larger sample size of students with different demographic data (i.e., gender identification, cultural backgrounds, geographic locations).

Implications

This study highlights implications for counselor educators and clinical supervisors to be aware of when teaching, advising, and supervising underrepresented students. Cultural competence in the classroom is essential to the experience of underrepresented students, particularly in predominantly White CE programs. While it is understood that White faculty cannot fully understand the lived experience of students, they can demonstrate their knowledge of the challenges faced by underrepresented students by asking questions and facilitating a safe classroom environment for students to feel seen and heard. Further, by acknowledging, understanding, and discussing White privilege, White faculty can continue to grow personally and

professionally through awareness, knowledge, skills, and action as called to do so by *The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies* (MSJCC; 2015). At minimum, faculty should read key books on race and white privilege such as *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum; *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo; and *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi. For more advanced exploration, faculty can enroll in professional workshops and continuing education focused on diversity, antiracism, and social justice advocacy.

In addition to professional development, counselor educators and supervisors must strengthen their awareness of underrepresented student experiences. According to CACREP's 2017 Vital Stats Report, 33% of enrollment was comprised of underrepresented student groups, while approximately 60% was comprised of White students. Five years ago, the racial identity of enrolled students was alarmingly similar (CACREP, 2012). As participants in this study shared, being underrepresented leaves students feeling alone, misunderstood, and isolated. It is critical that CE programs remain vigilant in their efforts to increase the diversity of their student body by intentionally attracting, enrolling, and retaining underrepresented students. For example, CE programs could offer open houses (in-person or virtual) at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and students hailing from Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) to share information about the counseling field and how to apply to the program.

As the participants in the current study indicated, underrepresented students often feel connected with peers who they feel can understand their experience. One way that CE programs can foster this connection is by creating space for students to meet and share their experiences. For example, programs can create safe spaces and support groups. These spaces can give voice to students, as well as create a sense of community. In addition to peer groups, mentorship is essential.

While CACREP mandates that CE programs "makes continuous and systematic efforts to recruit, employ, and retain a diverse faculty to create and support an inclusive learning community" (p. 1), the 2017 Vital Statistics Report indicates that approximately 71% of full-time faculty in Counselor Education programs identify as White. Counselor Education programs must make it a priority to recruit, employ, and retain underrepresented faculty. A few things for CE programs to consider are training search committee members on diversity recruitment; posting open positions on listservs geared towards diverse audiences (i.e., Academic Diversity Search); and offering a clear diversity statement on all job postings and the program's website.

One immediate way that White faculty can support underrepresented students in their CE programs is by facilitating race related topics with intentionality. A critical aspect of the theme, "bringing it up" included faculty not burdening or singling out students to become a spokesperson for their group. Sue (2016) shared five effective strategies in facilitating difficult race dialogue: 1) Understand your racial/cultural identity; 2) Acknowledge and admit your racial biases; 3) Validate and facilitate discussion of feelings; 4) Control the process, not the content 5) Validate, encourage, and express admiration and appreciation to participants who speak when it feels unsafe to do so. Thus, CE programs should offer professional development opportunities for faculty focused on strengthening cultural competency and anti-racist teaching practices, going beyond faculty obtaining preferred continuing education credits of their choice. For example, hosting race-informed professionals to provide tailored training to the faculty within the CE program.

Conclusion

For counselor education programs to continue to remain inclusive and increase diversity, it is essential for counselor educators to understand the racial and ethnic experiences of underrepresented students enrolled in their programs. The Covid-19 pandemic and racial unrest in

the country over the past few years have highlighted continued disparity in our programs. In addition to making intentional efforts to attract and retain diverse students and faculty to their programs, CE programs and faculty must remain vigilant in professional development followed by program evaluation. These efforts will help to minimize harm to students and facilitate a learning environment where students feel included, empowered, and heard as they move forward in their careers. As counselor educators, we must continue to expand our efforts to ensure more voices are represented in the field.

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