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## Creating a Healthy Classroom Environment in Multicultural Counseling Courses


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**Creating a Healthy Classroom Environment in**

**Multicultural Counseling Courses**

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### **Abstract**

To assist educators in developing transformative learning environments, and effectively engaging in difficult dialogues regarding multicultural counseling topics, a qualitative study was conducted to systemically examine the perceptions and reactions of twenty (graduate counselor education students enrolled in a multicultural counseling course. In this course, students experienced various learning environments all designed to enhance the topic of the day. Students were instructed to journal their thoughts, which became the raw data that was later, analyzed for themes. Students reported a need to be in an environment where there was trust, an ongoing need to reflect on the content, and difficulty discussing their school experiences with friends/family not in the helping profession.

## **Creating a Healthy Classroom Environment in Multicultural Counseling Courses**

Fostering transformative learning environments depends largely on the development of meaningful and genuine relationships between professors and their students. Transformative learning incorporates a central process of rationality, affective and experiential differences depending on the person's engagement and the context of a situation (Cranton, 2006). Each student is an entity of a microcosm, meaning each person will experience education differently due to various implications and processes. A constructive classroom setting, however, may effectively provide a safe forum for students to feel comfortable sharing personal viewpoints about course material.

Transformative learning has implications for counselor educators and students to engage in a shared endeavor through common experiences. Training environments are challenged to foster students' increased awareness of one another's worldview by exploring the process of what is not known as an alternative to transmitting what is known (Ettling, 2006; Hoggan, 2016). The lifelong process of individuation is a pertinent step in transformative learning through the development of the whole person and the foundation of challenging personal perspectives of norms. Individuation is developed through differentiating self from others in order to develop, share and express viewpoints, resulting in the cultivation of a new foundation that can stimulate dialogue and productive communication between the professor and student (Cranton & King, 2003). As a practice for transformative learning, both student and professor are encouraged to rethink the meanings of development and stretch their learning to stimulate collaboration in the educational and cultural contexts.

The attitude of attunement is an important aspect, which works to generate transformational learning by introducing the ability to listen carefully to the voiced and unvoiced content shared between professor and student (Ettling, 2006). This dynamic allows all involved parties to interconnect the complexity of a person (i.e. mindset, perspectives, worldview) to find connections with others, thus increasing awareness and aligns awareness to action.

The nature of learning environments in academia is changing continuously due to advancements in technology associated with information acquisition, dissemination and obtaining information. Oblinger and Oblinger (2005), stated that the “Net” generation college student has been surrounded by technology at a young age in a variety of forms (i.e. television, computers, video games, and social media). Technology has given this generation of students an opportunity to easily access an abundance of information and greater digital literacy.

Pedagogically, distance education format, wherein students are able to access information and class direction from the comforts of their home has become more prevalent across all the curricula and institutions worldwide (Shacher & Neumann, 2003). Conveniently these students are appropriately referred to as the “Net” generation or the information age group (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), who comfortably and competently use technology and digital communication, which is a major shift from info through print.

### **Teaching Multicultural Counseling and difficult dialogue subject matter**

Teaching courses where students examine their own bias/prejudices from a multicultural perspective could be professionally dangerous for faculty of color; especially those working at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Sue, Rivera, Watkins, Kim, Kim, & Williams, 2011). The ebb and flow between faculty of color and White students represent a microcosm of race relations in our society (Sue, 2010). These volatile classroom racial dynamics may impede

instructor teaching, and restrict student learning, while simultaneously fostering the development, and maintenance of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). The tense classroom environment also has the capacity to facilitate the development of difficult dialogues on race (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

Microaggressions are intentional or unintentional brief and commonplace daily verbal, nonverbal, environmental slights, insults, invalidations, and indignities, whether they are intentional or unintentional, directed at people of color (Sue et al., 2007). Difficult dialogues on race have been defined as threatening conversations or interactions between members of different racial or ethnic groups (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009). These dialogues effecting both faculty and students, reveal intimate thoughts, beliefs, or feelings related to racial prejudice or bias (Sue, Rivera, Watkins, Kim, Kim, & Williams, 2011). The uncomfortable feelings manifesting from the dialogues may foster students' negative bias towards the classroom although the experience the nature of the content is to enhance students' self – and other influence awareness of others. Negative bias may in faculty evaluations, thus hindering, especially junior faculty members, professional progress. Although students may be uneasy about expressions because of faculty authority and grading assessments. Student bias may influence course evaluation.

Professors who work towards developing rapport and stimulating engagement within their classroom are presented with negative feedback if students' do not view the learning environment as conducive to progressive learning (Wood, 2012). Perception is the process of creating meaning by selecting, organizing and interpreting information from the environment (Hurden, Harrison & Hodge, 2005). The environment impacts different aspects of the mind, which in turn influences the perception of the environment especially for a student who meets in a single location at least three hours per week.

The initial perception of processing new information is determined by how an individual conceptualizes the information collected in the environment (Wood, 2012). The environment impacts student perception and it affects how a student interacts with peers and professors, student's academic outcome and student's continuation in a program. Otter et al. (2013) said perceptions of faculty and student viewpoints may influence behavior of effort, student learning and overall satisfaction. The influence of perception (i.e. negative or positive) displayed by a student is shown to affect performance in classroom activities (Ferriera & Santason, 2008) resulting from subjectivity of information gathered and experiences formulated to create perceptions that in turn impact behavior (Otter et al., 2013). Once initial perceptions are formulated, it is hard to change without valid support (Wood, 2012), making a negative experience hard to rectify.

### **Transformative Learning and Transformative Learning Environments**

Transformative learning is the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic worldviews and specific capacities of the self. In counseling the worldview consists of the intersection of the locus of control with the locus of responsibility (Sue, 2016). Transformative learning is facilitated through intentional direction of process such as appreciatively accessing and receiving the symbolic contents of the unconscious and critically analyzing underlying premises (Elias, 1997). The researchers of this project believe the symbolic information can best manifest itself by changing the physical classroom space.

The effectiveness of the classroom environments is affected by the mood of the class, physical spatial arrangement, the time/day of the class meeting, and the student/instructor and peer interactions (Banks, 2014). Effective and positive classroom environments have been found to associate with improving student/educator dynamics and to stimulate the commitment to

improve learning performance (Shan, Li, Shi, Wang, & Cai, 2014). Specific to creating effective and positive learning spaces, efficient communication has been noted as a key component. Effective communication includes provision of opportunities, platforms and adequate channels to access and create dialogue that extends beyond a basic understanding of students' interests or professors' research platforms.

Another important component to positivity in the classroom environment is reliance on praise and encouragement above criticism. Positive environments can promote emotional satisfaction and influence perceptions and behaviors towards the learning environment. Educators who demonstrate enthusiasm and cheerfulness enhance the learning environment. Shan, Li, Shi, Wang, and Cai, (2014), indicated educators who create a sense of community, respond to academic and personal needs, foster positive relationships, and have more engaged and enthusiastic students and improved academic achievement.

The establishment of authentic (genuine) relationships and the professors engaging in self-reflection are a couple of the additional contributors to creating a healthy and effective classroom. Creating authentic relationships with students correlates with viewing them as individuals. Professors who do not view students as individuals are less likely to create authentic relationships. Professors who fail to develop such relationships are likely to have negative perceptions of students. These positions are socially constructed within educational systems where notions such as “students cannot read or write anymore, students are lazy, and students just want to get a job” are the foundation for faculty perspectives (Otter et al., 2013). Such notions inhibit faculty's ability to recognize misconceptions of students' desired or goals in the duration of a course leading to the formulation of false rules and negatively expressed responses to students' behaviors.



Critical reflection is another core aspect of transformative learning. An educator distinguishing one's own personal and professional sense of self as a professor in contrast to the societal persona of a professor helps to bring about comprehension of values and instructional practices. These reflections incorporate perceptions of students and the persona of students to better cultivate genuine relationships that encompass a drive towards success and progression. Even though learning depends on the nature of dialogue between professor, student and peer relationships, transformative learning is stimulated by experiential instances and events that challenge the habitual expectations about one's self and surrounding entities (Cranton, 2006).

Based on the values acknowledged through ongoing introspection, professors are able to respectfully consider difference in values and attitudes among students and can exhibit this cultural sensitivity in knowledge dissemination. The educator viewing the student as a future colleague will to engage in mutual sharing of expertise and experience. Relationships with students should be the development and maintenance of congruent with values, beliefs and the philosophy of teaching to enable a positive and genuine relationship in and outside of the classroom setting.

In conclusion, currently there is a limited number of studies specifically examining the relationship and interactions between instructor and students (Jia et al., 2009). Although studies have found significant correlations between faculty-student interaction and students learning performance (He, 2013), perceptions of a positive emotional climate, and perceptions of availability of faculty support (Wooley et al., 2009), very little is known about the quality of faculty student relationships within the context of multicultural counseling classroom environments wherein intense affect due to differences in values and attitudes are more apt to occur. The purpose of the present study is to examine faculty and students' perceptions of

healthy and productive academic environments. Within this context, these perceptions will be dissected and conceptualized identify factors, which facilitate learning environments conducive to positive growth, enjoyment and academic success.

### **Methods**

Variables noted in the literature addressing transformative environments were dissected into specific themes influences on students' learning, and influences on interactions with peers, and student professors. Different academic environments were a church meeting room and a traditional classroom setting. Graduate level counseling students, enrolled in a multicultural course, in a CACREP accredited program in the southeast United States were asked to consider participation in a study of learning environments.

### **Participants**

Masters level counseling students enrolled in a fall semester section of a cultural diversity counseling course were invited to serve as participants. As an exercise in self-reflection and growth, students were required to journal about their experiences throughout the course. Journal entries were submitted to the professor record every week (16-week duration). At the conclusion of the course, and in effort to avoid bias, all students were formally invited to participate. The twenty participants included: 7 white females (24-39 years of age); and African Americans- 2 female (25-28 years); 1 male (35 years).

### **Description of the Professor**

The instructor was a Black man, who was in his mid-thirties. At the time of the study, the instructor of record had the academic rank of Associate professor. The professor was not new to teaching diversity, multicultural scholarship nor multicultural professional service. He was active in the multicultural professional associations, and had several refereed publication and

presentations on various diversity topics. With respect to teaching (general) diversity topics, he was mentored (and warned) on how such controversial and provocative conversations could be dangerous to one's career advancement. Yet, this was the exact type of dialogue necessary to bring about sincere and genuine growth and introspection.

### **Procedures**

Students were informed of the nature of the study, that participation was voluntary, no personal identifying information would be measured and there would be no academic impact based on the decision regarding participation. To understand the differences in students' perspectives of various classroom formats, students were asked to submit a journal of their experiences based on different environments. Each student responded with their reaction to the conduciveness of the learning setting to include student's comfort level in interacting with others and how these settings improve or reduce educational immersion. As a final entry, students described their overall academic experience with comparative explanations of each setting. At the end of the semester, these journals were collected to proceed with qualitative analyses.

To obtain informed opinions about perspectives of transformative environments, only students who participated in the study from the initial meeting to the final class were included in the sample. The purpose of this was to eliminate any effects in differences of other class formats and classroom settings. For example, if a student is taught a different course with non-comparative classroom settings like a fast-food restaurant, differences in the students' perceptions of classroom environments are confounded with differences in not just course content but classroom location as well. Prior to the commencement of the study, the institution research board approval was obtained. Students who chose to participate in the study were

informed of each learning environment at the beginning of the next semester via syllabi details. Participants read and were given a copy of the information and signed appropriate consent forms.

### **Data Analysis**

The weekly journal entries were analyzed using Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory methodology. Specifically, two coding techniques—Initial coding and Process coding—were used to analyze the data. These techniques involved reading the journal entries word-by-word, line-by-line and attuning to words and phrases that appeared to be of initial significance. This step in the coding process “can provide a crucial check on whether you have grasped what is significant” to the participants, and may assist to “crystallize and condense meanings” (Charmaz, p. 57). Next, we coded the data using process coding as this technique is considered one of the ‘foundation methods for grounded theory’ (Saldaña, 2009, p. 56). This approach to coding drew attention words and phrases that exclusively imply action in the data (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, if a phrase lacked a gerund (“-ing” word), but we interpreted an action was implied; we converted the phrase to include the appropriate gerund to describe the specific action. For example, we converted the word *learn* to *learning* and coding it as LEARNING. This step in the analysis process helped us to gain a better sense of how the students’ experiences and events evolved while participating in a healthy classroom. These identified themes gave researchers the option to examine and compare each student’s perspective of the learning environment in order to postulate a common premise of research. Initially broad categories were determined and used to code the information. After completing the multi-step analysis, these broad categories were dissected into more specific categories to better understand the main themes originated from the journal entries. To improve both reliability and validity of analysis,

colleagues were asked to read and evaluate the created themes and data collected. Comparisons of the themes substantiated the original data interpretations.

### **Findings**

We undertook this research to identify student's perceptions of different learning environments and to answer the broader questions of how counselor educators might improve the learning setting and bring about advanced engagement and educational learning. The following themes reflective of the students' perceptions of a health classroom were identified: (a) Counselor Educators need to create an environment wherein reflection with vulnerability is welcomed without reservation; (b) Counselor Educators need to allow students to negotiate her or his level of cultural awareness with regard to self and others; (c) Counselor Educators should create an educational environment wherein transfer of learning occurs while engaging with conversations with individuals outside the helping profession.

#### **Reflection with Vulnerability**

Before moving forward, it is critical to define reflection with vulnerability. We argue that one must have courage to reach the depths of vulnerability. Courage is derived from *cor*—the Latin word for heart and it originally meant what is in one's thoughts (Harper, 2013). Nonetheless, a more modern conceptualization is that courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line (Brown, 2010, p. 31). Many of the students' journal entries mentioned how they reflected with vulnerability on their personal thoughts and feelings outside of class that they believed were relevant to the course experiences. It appears the students trusted the educator to the point where they were comfortable expressing themselves freely within the journal entries. For example, one student demonstrated how he reflected with vulnerability and shared,

I know that before this class I wouldn't have even considered other possibilities. I would have just brushed off the entire situation as another ignorant comment to ignore. But for the first time I'm considering the context and possible intentions behind comments.

The professor also engaged in conversations with the students after class. This allowed the students to continue reflecting and exposing their vulnerability with the professor. For instance, another student mentioned,

After leaving that night and having talked with you, I felt challenged to continue to discuss race issues and even celebrate race more than I had before. I don't want to be blind to race. I want to be aware. And I think I am more aware today that I was last week.

Even days, weeks, and some months later, the students remained in a process of reflection with vulnerability. One student stated how she had several dreams surrounding the topic they had discussed in class. She continues and wrote,

Usually what you dream about is something that is pressing in your thoughts or heart, so perhaps this class is doing more internal stretching than I give it credit for. Never thought I'd see the day when I'd dream about a counseling class.

### **Cultural Awareness**

Many of the students' journals included excerpts that highlighted their negotiation of tension with regard to cultural awareness of self and others. Specifically, multiple entries directly mentioned their awareness with emphasis placed on race, privilege, and oppression as they reflected on various experiences within the classroom. One student's reflection on cultural self-awareness noted, [A few weeks back, I got to talking with a close friend of mine that happens to be biracial (Hispanic and White). I spoke with her about racism and if it had ever affected her].

In another example, one student began her journal entry by offering her thoughts about the importance of a counseling professional being cultural aware. She remarked,

“To me social justice counseling involves awareness, acknowledgement, and subtle action. As a counselor you have to be aware of the role that a client may place on you. While you may not discriminate, as a white woman I may represent every other white woman that has discriminated against my client in the past. I have to be aware that this may affect my client’s ability or willingness to open up to me or allow me to work with them.”

Another student mentioned how his family’s racial joke made him uncomfortable. Only after participation in this class did he connect his discomfort with a different level of cultural awareness. He explained,

“There was also a racial joke told that made me uncomfortable. I was trying to remember any other time I had heard my family discuss something like this and I couldn’t. Therefore, not only did I become aware that my family was stereotyping and telling racial jokes but I also became aware of the fact that I had never been aware before.”

Another student reflected on her practice as a counseling professional and stated [I also may need to make subtle actions in social situations or with other co-workers to foster proper multicultural awareness and support in my practice].

Lastly, another student’s reflection expressed his shame regarding to how many people of color he knew. One of his journal entries included [I have realized that I know an embarrassingly few number of people of color. More embarrassing than that is how uncomfortable and avoidant I am around them].

From another perspective, many of the students wrote about their reflections about privilege, in particular white privilege. Some visiting the Civil Rights Museum prompted some students to reflect more on privilege and counselor education. For example, one student stated:

“I think the Civil Rights Institution and other similar museums show the social injustices that people of color have faced and continued to face throughout their lifetimes. It is extremely important for counselors to understand these injustices as to prevent it from happening during counseling sessions and have a better understanding of the systems that are working against the progress of the client.”

In a similar vein, another student shared:

“I never seem to have to look far for ways to relate class discussions or topics to outside classroom events, which still continues to amaze me. I received an email from my best friend. She is always sending me emails about racial slurs and incidents, and I guess since I consistently receive such information from her I have become somewhat desensitized to some of its content.”

The students participated in another activity that involved them watching a video of Tim Wise ‘as he’ discussed white privilege. As one of the students reflected he wrote:

“I was very skeptical of Tim’s speech at first. The entire notion of a non-racist White activist was very foreign to me. However, Tim did not disappoint, his thoughts and comments on white privilege were quite inspiring. The points that he brought up were things that I’ve never really thought of in the way he expressed them.”

### **Transfer of Learning**

Merriam and Brendan (2005) tell us that “Whether it be in the community, in professional settings, or in business and industry, educators who plan and implement programs



for adult hope that what is taught is learned and that this learning transfers beyond the classroom” (p.1). On many accounts, students in this study described how there was a transfer of learning as an outgrowth of participating in the activities within this healthy classroom. For instance, one student shared:

“I spend a great deal of time discussing the events of class with my co-workers, friends, and family because I have truly been surprised and enlightened by the discussions and topics of this class.”

Other students mentioned how the high engagement within this healthy classroom helped them to be comfortable in having crucial conversations (Patterson, Grenny, McMillian, & Switzler 2012) with family members and friends. For example, one student noted:

“Just this past Friday night, I spoke to some family members at a get-together about the book *Overcoming Our Racism* and *The Bluest Eye*. It was an interesting round of discussion to say the least. I can see where issues I may have felt about one way in the past, are now different when I was discussing this with them.”

Another student recalled an interaction with his brother-in-law as they engaged in conversation about racism and wrote:

“My brother-in-law came to visit us this weekend. I was reading *Overcoming Our Racism* and he asked me about it. I told him about the social and cultural diversity class and mentioned some of the topics we had been discussing. He began to tell me what he thought about himself and being a racist. He, unsurprisingly, claimed that he was not racist. He went on to prove this fact by saying that he does not judge people by their color but rather by his one-on-one impressions of them. This opened the door for me to discuss “color-blindness” with him. He listened intently. When I mentioned that color-blindness

robs a person of color of his or her culture, he admitted that he had never thought of it that way. Although it was just my brother-in-law, someone who I feel very comfortable with, it was still an improvement in speaking up about what I have been working on. I am hoping that the more I speak up with family and friends, I will become more and more comfortable and eventually be willing to speak up more.”

Because the African American students were in the numerical minority, both in the entire graduate program, as well as in the course, they admitted some hesitance in being totally transparent and forthcoming with the revelations revealed by their mates. In private (via journal) they spoke of validation of their historical feelings. Students of color confessed to being told how to feel or being victims of microaggressions – but not knowing how to classify these emotions. The confessions felt empowering and gratifying.

### **Implications and Considerations for Future Research**

The findings from this study offer a different way to encourage counselor educators and students to engage in difficult conversations regarding multiculturalism and cultural competency. Previous studies have used a form of conflict resolution, thus seeing cultural competency as a somewhat adversarial dialogue (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Arredondo & Arciniega, 2001), and not one of reflection coupled with honest conversation. Faculty, specifically faculty of color, who teach subject matter that is considered controversial could use the findings from the study as they continue to develop and refine their teaching, scholarship and counseling practice.

In terms of teaching, the findings of this study can offer insight on how counselor educators can implement strategies to encourage students to engaging in critical reflection. Specifically, faculty can use these findings to create a classroom environment where students are

comfortable, engaged and ready to learn. If students feel safe, and are genuinely accepted, they will increase their level of seriousness and focus, which is the essence of a positive learning environment.

Steps on how to create such a space might involve explaining that the classroom is a place where students are encouraged to be vulnerable. Diversity courses evoke several emotions and can be deemed provocative and profound (Sue, et al., 2011). Graduate students are inclined to do what is safe – remain silent – and may choose to not disclose any sincere feelings because of possible backlash and or embarrassment. Moreover, faculty who teach such a course are also subject to unfair and unjust feedback and evaluations. Students have shown a tendency to lash out at professors who challenge and stretch students.

We would be remiss to not mention the risk of creating a healthy learning environment that includes topics of discussion that are perceived as culturally sensitive. In this study, not all the responses were positive. While the number of negative statements were not sufficient to constitute a theme, students were sometimes critical of the experiential/transformational activities. Some students expressed (paraphrase) nervousness about losing friends and family due to their newly acquired knowledge. Students also reported extreme amounts of guilt associated with their historical past and their present. The final source of negative remarks came from the student course evaluations. These comments were not analyzed because they were not stated in the journals. The evaluation statements revealed comments on course presentation stating it was too Black, or too one-sided, with too much emphasis on ethnicity. Other student responses on course evaluations criticized the professor as trying to promote a personal agenda. Ironically, these comments were all consistent with the diversity pedagogy literature (Alexander & Moore, 2008). Students,

who are taught provocative diversity lessons, especially on those topics that possibly challenge their world view, the natural response is one of anger and or guilt; which are precursors to acceptance (Sue, et al., 2011).

Closson (2013) purported that “a primary risk in raising issues of racial, cultural and ethnic differences is that learners may not immediately think that your efforts are a means of enhancing the transfer of the concepts and skills you are teaching” (p. 67). Nonetheless, the findings highlight how this healthy learning environment allowed for the students to move beyond reflection with vulnerability and a transfer of learning did occur. It appears that the journaling assignment helped the students reach a level of critical reflection amid their professional development as counseling professionals. Specifically, the transfer of learning was illuminated as the students shared their experiences of engaging in culturally sensitive dialogue with colleagues and individuals outside of the counseling profession.

This study was qualitative in design. The perceptions of the students were amplified so the researchers could have some rich understanding of them as they experienced the various classroom environments. Counselor educators could possibly transfer various aspects of the findings to their own diversity courses. Moreover, counseling courses are not taught in a uniform method. Course instruction is based on the expertise, cultural competency, and level of comfort of the professor of record. Multicultural course instruction is often criticized as being one of the most significant areas of the helping profession, yet it is devalued by not having a method of instruction that can be experienced by all students regardless of the instructor (Kiselica, 1998). Standardizing the instruction could be viewed as a provision for student experiential enhancement while still supporting the classroom autonomy of the instructor (Stefanou, Perencevich, Dicintio, & Turner, 2004).

Future considerations for studies involving diversity-related, transformative, learning practices might consider replication of the current study at various campus settings. This study was completed at a large public university in the Southeast United States. The more the study is replicated in different university settings could help validate and strengthen the findings as well as lead to the development of multicultural pedagogical theory. Whether the findings at these different settings are similar or different to those in this study, the results help scholars explore how students perceive multicultural material with detail and clarity.

It is worth reiterating the professor's ability to establish authentic relationships and engage in self-reflection are key additional contributors. Failing to develop such connections could lead to an adverse view of the professor. Future studies are recommended to also engage in an in depth examination of the experiences of the instructor and on student/teacher relationships and how bonding contributes to the establishment of a nourishing atmosphere.

In terms of generalizability, future researchers who have an interest in multicultural transformative studies may wish to add quantitative aspect to the experimental design with larger sample sizes across various settings, and use of standardized measures, which would enhance generalizability of the results. Quantitative research usually involves few variables and many cases, and employs prescribed procedures to ensure validity and reliability. Such research may increase objectivity and greater perceived validity of the results. The quantitative design would provide summaries of data that support generalizations about transformative classrooms. Using a quantitative method makes the replication of the study easier; and results of statistical data analyses facilitate greater ease in comparing findings with similar studies. Kruger (2003) confirms that 'quantitative methods allow us to summarize vast sources of information and facilitate comparisons across categories and over time'.

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