Linking Multicultural Counseling and Social Justice Through Advocacy

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Abstract:

The concepts of multicultural counseling, social justice, and advocacy may be utilized without a clear sense of how best to operationalize them in counselor training. In this article, the authors offer a perspective on how advocacy and social justice interrelate and share strategies for infusing advocacy into counselor training to achieve social justice goals. The authors provide six experiential activities counselor educators may use to provide counselors-in-training experience in a range of advocacy skills.

Article:

Introduction

For nearly two and a half decades, members of the counseling profession have been actively working on the question of how best to serve an increasingly diverse client base in an increasingly global society. In 1992, the publication of the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCCs) led to a wave of research and changes to counseling practice by placing multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills in the center of ethical and competent counseling (Arredondo et al., 1996; D'Andrea & Heckman, 2008; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Despite the widespread adoption of a multicultural paradigm, counselors recognized another need. Many argued that interventions too narrowly focused at the individual level were not sufficient to remedy mental health concerns that likely stem from structural inequality and oppression, so counselors began to turn their attention to counseling interventions needed at the community, institutional, and societal levels (Arredondo et al., 1996; Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, & Parham, 2008; Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010; Chang, Hays, & Milliken, 2009; Goodman et al., 2004; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lee, Smith, & Henry, 2013; Speight & Vera, 2004; Vera & Speight, 2003).

Advocacy competencies were written in 2002, endorsed by American Counseling Association's (ACA) Governing Council in 2003, and in many ways filled this need (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003; Torporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). Two dimensions of advocacy were identified: extent of client involvement (acting with the client or acting on behalf of the client) and level of intervention (individual, community, and public). This resulted in a framework of six domains of advocacy for counselors: (a) client/student empowerment, (b) client/student advocacy, (c) community collaboration, (d) systems advocacy, (e) public information, and (f) social/political advocacy. These competencies supported the notion that in order to promote mental health and wellness, counselors would likely need to intervene beyond the walls of their offices (Lee & Rodgers, 2009).

Recently, promoting social justice was explicitly listed as one of five core values of the counseling profession (ACA, 2014). In 2015, the MCCs were updated and entitled the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCCs; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2015). TheMSJCCs provide a developmental framework of competence that emphasizes the importance of action in addition to knowledge, skills, and awareness and culminates in a socioecological model of counseling and advocacy interventions that span from the intrapersonal to the global (Ratts et al., 2015). The updated competencies represent a more complete synthesis of advocacy, social justice, and multiculturalism that had been missing from the counseling literature until now.

Figure 1. Interdependence of multicultural competence, advocacy, and social justice.

Each of these milestones further cemented and affirmed the counseling profession's commitment to social justice. Despite ongoing revision and refinement of competence, there remains a lack of clarity around the concrete efforts counselors can undertake to promote social justice. We maintain that multiculturalism, advocacy, and social justice are complementary yet distinct and when working optimally, come together like gears in a well-oiled machine (Figure 1). As we continue to understand our role as advocates for social justice, it is important that counselors share a common language. Therefore, this article has two main goals: (a) offer a clear and

coherent vocabulary for understanding how advocacy and social justice interrelate, and (b) share strategies for infusing advocacy into counselor training. As counselors understand how these pieces of ethical and competent counseling practice fit together, they may be more likely to move from awareness to action in promoting social justice.

Defining social justice and advocacy

Lee and Hipolito-Delgado (2007) defined social justice as "full participation of all people in the life of a society, particularly those who have been systematically excluded on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender, age, physical or mental disability, education, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics" (p. xiv). Social justice, by this definition, is an end goal, but it can also be thought of as a process or a stance rather than a state (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Lewis, Lenski, Mukhopadyay, & Cartwright, 2010; Sultana, 2014). The goal of social justice counseling is to provide all people the opportunity to reach their full potential free from oppression by using advocacy as a mechanism to address client problems (Chung & Bemak, 2012; Lewis, Ratts, Paladino, & Toporek, 2011; Ratts, Lewis, & Toporek, 2010; Smith, Reynolds, & Rovnak, 2009).

Multiculturalism, social justice, and related frameworks (e.g., feminist theories: Brown, 1994) share several assumptions about what it takes for counseling to be truly transformative: (a) the importance of counselor reflexivity, (b) a focus on critical consciousness, (c) empowerment, and (d) advocacy. Self-reflexivity, or critical self-reflection, is an ongoing process that is important for counselors and advocates to practice, particularly those who engage in advocacy efforts (Arredondo et al., 2008; Collins, Arthur, & Brown, 2013; Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007; Lee & Rodgers, 2009; McWhirter, 1997; Morrow, Hawxhurst, Montes de Vegas, Abousleman, & Castañeda, 2006). Lee and Hipolito-Delgado (2007) argued that there are three levels of awareness counselors need to possess: awareness of self, interpersonal awareness, and systemic awareness. Self-awareness is foundational; multicultural and advocacy interventions cannot be truly effective without it (Lee, 2012; Roysicar, 2009).

Ongoing self-reflexivity likely will lead to increased critical consciousness, a frequently cited key factor in social justice counseling (Brown & Perry, 2011; Landreman, Rasmussen, King, & Jiang, 2007; Ratts, 2009). Whereas self-reflexivity is an internal process, critical consciousness incorporates a focus on the self as embedded within social systems and power dynamics. The concept of critical consciousness is most frequently attributed to Paulo Freire (1970), who theorized that becoming aware of one's position in an oppressive reality leads to engagement in social change efforts or advocacy (Manis, 2012). Although Freire was referring to critical pedagogy in his work, his conviction that dialogue about the dynamics of privilege and oppression leads to critical consciousness can be applied to the therapeutic setting as well. As critical consciousness is raised, empowerment can begin to be achieved. Holcomb-McCoy and Mitchell (2007) defined empowerment as "a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations" (pp. 147–148). To understand empowerment, it is also important to think about the concept of power—how it is gained and how it is diminished. Prilleltensky (2008) described power as "a combination of ability and opportunity to influence a course of events" (p. 119). Furthermore, Lee et al. (2013) noted that when external oppressions are internalized, personal

power is diminished. Although neither critical consciousness nor empowerment alone is enough to fully address the needs of clients and communities (Blustein, 2006; Lee et al., 2013), advocacy can only happen from a foundation of empowerment (Lee & Hipolito-Delgado, 2007). Once critical consciousness is raised and individuals or groups are empowered, action through advocacy becomes a central feature of a social justice counseling paradigm.

Client problems can occur internally or externally and from the individual to the global level. Where more traditional approaches to multicultural counseling tend to emphasize internal, individual change, advocates view helping from both systemic and individual perspectives, have skills and knowledge to act, and do so in partnership with those who may lack knowledge or skills to do so alone (Lee & Hipolito-Delgado, 2007). Action at the systemic level is of great concern in social justice counseling because a central premise of this paradigm is that social conditions such as institutionalized racism, classism, or sexism are key factors in determining behavior and well-being (Bryan, 2009; Constantine et al., 2007; Crethar, Rivera, & Nash, 2008; Lee & Hipolito-Delgado, 2007; Toporek et al., 2009).

Advocacy is the primary expression of social justice work (Toporek et al., 2009). If social justice is a goal, then advocacy is the path to achieving the goal. Promoting social justice is the value, and advocacy is the work we do to live out that value. Even with this shared value, moving from awareness to action can be a challenge for counselors (Goodman et al., 2004; Lee & Rodgers, 2009; Lee et al., 2013; Lewis, Toporek, & Ratts, 2010; McWhirter, 1997; Morrow et al., 2006; Norsworthy, Abrams, & Lindlau, 2012; Roysicar, 2009; Speight & Vera, 2004; Sumner, 2013). A review of the literature reveals that counselors are in need of skills and training in advocacy, as well as institutional supports (e.g., support from supervisors and employers) to be able to advocate more effectively (Arthur, Collins, Marshall, & McMahon, 2013; Glosoff & Durham, 2010; Lee et al., 2013). Counselors who undertake advocacy work may experience direct attempts to impede or otherwise block their efforts to challenge systems of oppression and therefore need specific skills to advocate effectively.

In order to prepare counselor trainees to engage in advocacy actions, we recommend thinking of advocacy as central to what counselors do every day whether at the individual, community, or systemic level. From this perspective, social justice and advocacy interventions need to be practiced in both the content and the process of the counseling classroom. Several counselor educators have underscored the importance of structuring classroom activities and relationships in a way that does not recapitulate harmful hierarchies or maintain inaccurate assumptions about others but instead allows students to harness the experience of the group/class for deepened reflection and awareness (Adams et al., 2007; Brubaker, Puig, Reese, & Young, 2010; Manis, 2012; Odegard & Vereen, 2010). For example, social justice pedagogy should intentionally generate critical consciousness in students and encourage them to question norms, as opposed to receiving knowledge about social groups without questioning (Goodman et al., 2015). In addition, instructors should consider ways to centralize the experiences of community members and give direct access to their voices and stories, as opposed to creating student spectators who observe a community from a distance without meaningful interaction. Finally, classroom dynamics should be interrogated for the presence of power, oppression, and voice. To this end, we offer strategies for counselor educators and supervisors to integrate advocacy skills training into their pedagogical toolboxes.

Infusing advocacy into counselor training

It appears that although practitioners are focusing on individual-level interventions, they have expressed a desire to act at the broader societal level but are in need of additional skills and support to undertake advocacy work (Crook, Stenger, Gesselman, 2015; McMahon, Arthur, & Collins, 2008; Steele, 2008). Counselor educators should note that engagement in advocacy can be influenced through providing students with opportunities to practice and dialogue about social issues. Specifically, research has indicated that political interest and skills in navigating difficult conversations seem to be important factors for counselors to be able to enact advocacy behaviors (Lewis et al., 2010; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Odegard & Vereen, 2010; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahan, 2010). Likewise, advocates often report needing to be strategic and resilient in their work, since resistance to change may be inevitable (Arthur, Collins, McMahon, & Marshall, 2009; Lee et al., 2013; McWhirter, 1997; Sumner, 2013). By providing opportunity for advocacy skill development and emphasizing the advocate role, counselor educators may help students address future barriers to social change.

To this end, we have highlighted six activities that could be utilized in a variety of counseling courses to provide students with hand-on experience using advocacy skills. Like multicultural competence, advocacy competence should be emphasized across the counseling curriculum, not just one or two courses. These activities correspond to the six levels of interventions outlined in the MSJCCs: (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, (c) institutional, (d) community, (e) public policy, and (f) international and global affairs. Advocacy skills such as critical thinking, communication, leadership, and assessment are transferrable to a variety of settings. Therefore, practicing them in the classroom prepares future counselors to apply the skills broadly in their personal and professional lives in ways that suit their preferences.

Activities and assignments to support advocacy development

Intrapersonal

One way to highlight the intrapersonal aspects of advocacy would be to consider students' personal identity categories. Gender identity/expression is one facet of identity that instructors could invite students to view through the lens of social justice. To set up the following activity, it is important to assess levels of awareness around the social construction of gender, to provide a range of language for students to consider (e.g., cisgender women/men, transgender women/men, gender neutrality, genderqueer, gender nonconforming), and to explore the oppressive nature of the gender binary. If the gender representation in the class is skewed in one direction, care should be taken not to silence or "other" class members with differing gender identifications. The purpose of this activity is to address internalized privilege and oppression, to develop some critical consciousness around limiting or restrictive gender roles and stereotypes, and to translate that insight into action for counselors and clients. In this activity, students engage in reflection by responding to six prompts: "Since I am (fill in gender identity here), I am required to be . . ., I am allowed to be . . ., and I am forbidden to be . . . ; If I were (a different assigned gender), I would be required to be . . ., I would be allowed to be . . ., and I would be forbidden to be . . . ." Depending on the size of the class, students can disclose their answers within small groups or

with the whole class. The activity can be modified depending on the course in which it is implemented. A practice-based application of the effects of limiting gender roles to counseling specialty areas such as couple and family counseling, career counseling, or counseling with adolescents would be beneficial. Importantly, the insights generated in the activity can be connected to advocacy and action with questions like: "How could we encourage clients to be good self-advocates if they were struggling with restrictive gender norms? In what circumstances might the counselor need to consider advocacy on behalf of a client who is being silenced or distressed by a gender identity that does not fit them?"

Interpersonal

Confronting stereotypes and challenging assumptions heard in everyday discourse can be important ways to create positive social change at the interpersonal level. For this activity, each class member should first try to recall a time they heard a prejudicial comment about a person or group from a friend, family member, class member, coworker, or acquaintance. Students should write down what they remember about the comment, including the context in which it was made and the degree of power or privilege held by each person in the scenario. Next, class members can replay the moment with a partner and process the immediate emotional reactions they had to the situation, which can have roots in early life experiences. Finally, students attempt to constructively challenge the oppressive aspects of the comment within the role play. If examples of harmful speech have been present in the classroom, it would be wise to allow those instances to be processed carefully within the classroom community. The National Coalition Building Institute offers a helpful framework that contrasts the strategies of fighting the offensive comment or the speaker, fleeing from the offensive comment without addressing it, or flowing with the offensive comment in a way that demonstrates empathy for the speaker and seeks to understand the underlying belief (Brown & Mazza, 2005). To apply this skill to the counselor role, students could be asked to consider when it might be appropriate to confront harmful speech with clients, with future colleagues, within work settings, or within communities. In the situation where a relationship needs to be preserved (such as between client and counselor), students can consider how attacking the speaker for the prejudicial comment (fight) may not be useful and how ignoring or fleeing from the comment keeps the hurtful dynamic in place. Rather, students can consider how their advanced listening and empathy skills could be applied to understand the experiences and beliefs behind the harmful speech (flow) and to allow for acceptance of the speaker while gently challenging the speech. Ideally, students would be able to try the skills of confronting and challenging in a professional setting and report to the class about their experience.

Institutional

An activity drawn from the text Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice illustrates the institutional level of counseling and advocacy interventions (Adams et al., 2007). The purpose of the activity is to explore the extent to which social institutions are supportive of clients. Instructors would first identify an institution with which students in the class were familiar (e.g., their university or department, an internship placement site, a local high school, the community police or courts) and ask them to consider how they would view those institutions if they were or are in marginalized social positions. For example, instructors can prompt conversation by asking

students to describe a neighborhood that has few economic resources (e.g., what do the schools look like, what stores are nearby, what kinds of jobs could people have if they didn't have cars and needed to use the bus system, how do police relate to that neighborhood, where can children play in those places). Next, students work in small groups to design—using words, images, or symbols—an institution that would be nonracist or nonclassist by definition (Adams et al., 2007). Students could brainstorm how various groups would be represented within the institution, what the underlying philosophy, values, and norms of the institution would be, and how the institution would operate to empower marginalized groups. A key step in translating student awareness into action would be to brainstorm behavioral steps needed to reach such an ideal state (e.g., create inclusive decision-making boards or decentralize power; identify and dismantle systemic barriers; practice restorative justice and reconciliation). Groups would present their designs to the rest of the class, and then all groups could consider how to advocate within current (nonideal) institutions to generate systems-level support for clients. By completing this activity, students gain experience questioning how clients and institutions relate to one another and how an institution may be perceived differently by different individuals. They have the opportunity to design an institution from scratch and discover whether and how it is possible to create a nonracist institution. This activity may also draw on some public policy-level interventions as students would have to consider how institutional policies would be inclusive. In doing so, students use basic case-level and systems-level advocacy skills such as working with stakeholders to generate consensus, documenting the advocacy needs of underrepresented individuals, teaching clients self-advocacy skills, and setting up boundaries to protect vulnerable clients (Dalrymple & Boylan, 2013).

Community

The community level of intervention requires that counselors understand community norms and values and their impact on clients. In order to give students hands-on experience with advocacy at the community level, an experiential, service-learning project may be ideal (Goodman et al., 2004; Murray, Pope, & Rowell, 2010; Toporek & Worthington, 2014). Depending on the instructor's relationships and familiarity with local community groups, students could work together in conducting a needs assessment through interviewing stakeholders (e.g., community workers, clients, volunteers, leaders) of a group or organization to identify salient issues related to local mental health care and wellness. If current relationships are not established, each student could be tasked with identifying one organization and doing informational interviews to learn more about their mission and services. Students could then compile their individual findings into a group resource guide to be disseminated to faculty and students in print or electronic format. Instructors should set realistic goals and be willing to devote considerable class time to a community-based service-learning project, since respectful and effective relationship building takes time. Allowing thoughtful engagement and reflection on this level of advocacy is important for student learning. The purpose of an activity in this domain is to help students understand local norms, values, and resources by engaging directly with their community through either developing a community resource guide or conducting a needs assessment with a particular group or organization that would be open to such a collaboration.

Public policy

Policy-level interventions are not mentioned as frequently in counseling interactions as individual-level interventions, so this is an area of growth for the profession. Rather than setting the goal of having students successfully change an unfair policy, one structured learning activity in this domain could be that of creating an action plan for policy change. Students could be tasked with identifying a local issue that has an impact on their clients or potential clients and investigating the policies that support unfair treatment. To keep this activity close to students' lives while still instilling the skills of higher-level (i.e., national) policy change, instructors may wish to encourage students to investigate policies at the university level such as sexual assault reporting or equal access for gender-nonconforming students. Once an issue and a policy are identified, students should make a plan for how they would work to change an unfair policy. Lee and Rodgers (2009) listed three avenues through which counselors can influence policy change. The first is to raise awareness of issues through organizing demonstrations or rallies and establishing a sense of urgency by engaging with the media. Next, public policy can be influenced by supporting existing alliances (e.g., student organizations, community partnerships) already working on the issue or creating new alliances if none exist. Finally, meeting directly with the policy makers who can influence needed changes and presenting the facts relevant to the issue is a critical piece of creating policy-level change. These avenues are possibilities students should consider when engaging in this class activity. They should outline how the current policy is hurting community members, do research to identify who has the power to change the policy, identify needed changes, and convince others to support such changes. These advocacy skills are relevant to the public policy domain and beyond. This activity can easily be modified to take place over the course of one class session or an entire semester, depending on the depth of experience the instructors wish to dedicate to this domain. Even without fully enacting the action plan, by having students name the various actions they could take, instructors would broaden students' horizons about ways in which they can promote social justice for clients.

International/global

Finally, instructors can highlight the importance of staying aware of global issues affecting mental health. One way to do this would be to have students utilize technology to interact with counselors or mental health professionals in other countries and start a class blog to document their learnings. The first author has implemented variations on a class blog in both undergraduate and graduate classes and has been impressed with the resources students find and share with one another. The purpose of the blog would be to increase the students' awareness of differences and similarities in how counseling is defined and practiced around the world. Each student would be responsible for contributing a story to the class blog at least once during the semester. The student would need to select a counselor from a list provided by the instructor, conduct an informational interview, and write a summary of what s/he learned. Instructors should provide guidelines to encourage students to provide sufficient context for their interviewee's setting and to ensure a nonencapsulated summary of the interview. Other students in the class would be required to respond to the original post with reflections, comments, or follow-up questions. Students should be encouraged to consider ways in which counselors around the world engage in advocacy. Students could select one particularly challenging or compelling interview and attempt

to practice advocacy in action by defining a need and coconstructing ways that the class and the interviewee could help address it in collaboration with colleagues around the globe.

Conclusion

By providing learning experiences associated with each level of counseling and advocacy intervention, instructors help teach skills that might not otherwise be addressed in counselor training. These skills are transferable to a variety of settings and client populations and help place the advocate role as a familiar one in new counselors' repertoire. The ideas presented in this section are meant to serve as a starting point for counselor educators and supervisors who wish to use creative and innovative methods to support the development of both novice and experienced counselors. For further reading and more ideas for experiential activities related to social justice and advocacy, we refer readers to Adams et al. (2007) and Donald and Moro (2014).

Advocacy connects the foundation of multiculturalism with the core value of promoting social justice. Once counselors become aware of the pervasive role and impact of culture, they begin to see individuals as part of a larger context. An increased awareness of systemic oppression often leads to a desire to engage in social action or advocacy (Chung & Bemak, 2012; Lewis & Arnold, 1998; Ratts, 2011). It is important to remember that multicultural competence is crucial to advocacy, since counselors must determine the cultural appropriateness of any advocacy intervention and remain aware of their attitudes and beliefs as an advocate (Lee & Rodgers, 2009; Toporek et al., 2009). Although these pieces fit tightly together (Figure 1), efforts to understand how they differ and interrelate are well spent. By describing key tenets of social justice counseling and sharing our conceptualizations of advocacy and social justice, we offer additional support to the growing body of knowledge that argues for centralizing advocacy in counselor education.

Becoming an advocate is personal, political, and a process (Lewis et al., 2010; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Odegard & Vereen, 2010; Singh et al., 2010); counselor training should reflect this through thoughtful and broad skill development in the classroom (Manis, 2012). We assert that when counselors "balance individual counseling with systems level social advocacy" (Ratts et al., 2015, p. 13) they more completely support the mental health and wellness of their clients. In doing so, they demonstrate leadership and pave the way for social justice in their institutions, communities, and the world (Lewis et al., 2011; López-Baez & Paylo, 2009).

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