

Developmental pathways of cultural immersion: Motivations, processes, and outcomes

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This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:

King, K. M., Borders, L. D., & Jones, C. T. (2021). Developmental pathways of cultural immersion: Motivations, processes, and outcomes. *Counselor Education and Supervision* 60(2), 129-147. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12199>

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Abstract:

Cultural immersion is a critical educational activity for developing greater cultural responsiveness. Analyzing journal entries written by students throughout their cultural immersion, we identified students' motivations, learning processes, and outcomes. Findings suggested developmental pathways that may assist counselor educators in stimulating meaningful student reflection across their immersion experiences.

Keywords: cultural immersion | multicultural and social justice counseling competence | counselor development | cultural self-awareness | cultural empathy

Article:

Cultural immersion (CI), a popular assignment in many multicultural counseling courses (Shannonhouse et al., 2018), challenges students to enter unfamiliar contexts and take seriously the worldviews and lifestyles of other populations (Pope-Davis et al., 1997; Prosek & Michel, 2016). The experience of being in the minority and participating in cultural exchange (e.g., dialogue, customs, events) prompts “disorienting dilemmas” (Shannonhouse et al., 2015, p. 303) in which students reckon with the inherent limitations of their own life experiences in interpreting the world around them. In the process, students are meant to develop cultural self-awareness, knowledge, and empathy for the experience of being “other” (Barden & Cashwell, 2013; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Shannonhouse et al., 2015), moving toward the ideal stance of multicultural and social justice counseling competence (Ratts et al., 2016; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). There is limited empirical support, however, that this shift occurs (Ishii et al., 2009; King et al., 2019). Few longitudinal studies of CI exist, and those that do (e.g., DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2011; King, 2020; Shannonhouse et al., 2015)

were focused on a small subset of students, involved international travel, and/or did not follow an identifiable CI model. Thus, counselor educators are limited in their ability to anticipate students' developmental trajectories during immersion. In the current study, we analyzed student journals at three time points of a local Multicultural Action Project (MAP; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2011) in order to capture how students' motivations for selecting a cultural group, learning processes, and outcomes unfolded across an entire cohort.

As a CI format, MAP is progressive, building from observation to information seeking to direct action phases. Observation and information seeking are preliminary stages for the student to gain perspective on the identified population's context. With this context as a backdrop, students then provide a direct service or join a group where they can be in community with the identified population. MAP direct action is thus built upon sustained interaction (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2011). In one cross-sectional study, the MAP demonstrated potential to be challenging and emotionally evocative across students, settings, and populations (e.g., King et al., 2019); however, aspects of CI that stimulated learning were not described. Students in a narrative study of MAP, who were initially distressed by contact with community members where their negative expectations appeared to be reinforced, later had positive interactions that served as powerful counters (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2011). Although longitudinal, this study centered CI experiences of three exemplar students, limiting generalizability. Similarly, King (2020) used thematic narrative analysis to depict two minoritized students' CI to challenge biases toward members of dominant cultural groups who had discriminated against them. In this MAP, students focused on tasks like seeking safety and affirming their rights to respect. However, more study is needed to examine development across students (i.e., minoritized and privileged) to differentiate universal experiences from those unique to student or CI groups.

To complement existing literature on CI that examines group-based international immersion, we assessed student experiences of an individualized local CI across a semester. This extension is critical because individually tailored CI can increase challenge and relevance to students' current context or eventual practice environment (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). Moreover, when CI is individualized, students can directly address biases and increase understanding of systemic inequities (Atkins et al., 2017; King et al., 2019), both foundational to growth in multicultural and social justice counseling competence (Ratts et al., 2016). In line with recommendations for meaningful immersion, students in this study also had prolonged interaction with group members over multiple days or events, often on more egalitarian or reciprocal terms (Shannonhouse et al., 2018). Within this context, we addressed the following research questions: What developmental trajectories do students experience in local, individually tailored CI? What are various motivations, processes, and outcomes of CI and how do they influence student development? Study of these questions can inform how counselor educators facilitate the activity for maximal impact as well as identify how specific elements of CI promote growth.

Method

We selected consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, 2012) to analyze students' journals. CQR is particularly amenable to analysis of specific events, especially when researchers want to “explore antecedents to the event of interest, factors that affect the event, descriptions of the

actual event, participant reactions, and consequences” (p. 86). Describing this broad event sequence was a primary goal of the study.

Participants and Procedure

With institutional review board approval, the first author invited all master's students completing a first semester Counseling Diverse Populations course ($N = 32$) to participate. Students were enrolled in an accredited counselor education program based in a midsize public southeastern university. The program offers a doctoral degree in counselor education and master's degrees in clinical mental health, couple and family, and school counseling. Part of a larger study on multicultural education, participants responded to demographic questions and quantitative instruments, and granted access to three journal entries completed for the MAP assignment. Each student received \$5 as compensation.

Thirty-one (96.88%) students submitted their journals for analysis. The majority ($n = 28$, 90.32%) self-identified as women, and three self-identified as men. They reported racial/ethnic backgrounds as White/European American ($n = 20$, 64.52%), Black/African American ($n = 7$, 22.58%), multiracial ($n = 3$, 9.68%), and Latinx ($n = 1$, 3.23%). Twenty-four indicated that they were heterosexual (77.42%), five students were bisexual (16.13%), and two were lesbian (6.45%). Two students reported that they had a disability (6.45%). The sample indicated a range of religious/spiritual backgrounds: 16 Protestant Christian (51.61%), 10 spiritual (32.26%), two none (6.45%), two other (6.45%), and one Catholic Christian (3.23%). Average age for this sample was 24.94 ($SD = 4.43$).

Given the open-ended MAP instructions with regards to identifying a population, students selected and interacted with a diverse range of cultural groups. The type of immersion populations most frequently selected ($n = 10$) were religious groups (Muslim $n = 5$, Christian $n = 1$, Buddhist $n = 2$, Judaism $n = 1$, Bahá'í $n = 1$). Immersing with racial/ethnic minority members was the next most frequently selected group ($n = 6$), with an even distribution among Asian/Asian American ($n = 2$), Black/African American ($n = 2$), and Latino/a/x individuals ($n = 2$). Four students chose to immerse with LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other) populations. Three identified socioeconomic status (SES) as a primary factor, noting intersecting identities: women of low SES, youth of color of low SES, and homeless individuals. Two selected disability (focusing on intellectual or developmental disabilities), two selected immigrant populations, two selected older adults (with one adding an intersecting White racial identity), one selected people at “end of life,” and one identified “men of color living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).” Across the MAP phases, students selected CI activities such as participating in discussions or workshops (e.g., vocal coaching for transgender people, information session for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities), attending religious services or festivals (e.g., Shabbat, Pride Parade), volunteering (e.g., community center, fundraiser), and patronizing restaurants/grocers.

Journal Entries

Student journals ($n = 93$) consisted of semistructured immersion proposal, observation, and final papers. Proposal journals preceded the MAP activity and framed student rationale and plans. The

observation journal coincided with the observation phase of the MAP, when students made initial contact with minimal to no interaction. The final journal encompassed reflection on both the information-seeking and the action phases of the MAP, including awareness, knowledge, and skills gained. Students were also assigned an information-seeking report (not analyzed in this study) to document relevant research on trends and counseling recommendations pertinent to the identified population. The instructor provided example CI activities (e.g., interacting with older adults in assisted living facilities) and urged students to engage with members of the cultural group (i.e. “not a spectator experience”) for a minimum of 7 hours. Responses to the following prompts enabled students to reflect on common developmental experiences across their individualized activities and are the basis for the current study:

1. Proposal (one page): Which population do you wish to work with? How will you go about completing the observation, information-seeking, and action levels of the MAP?
2. Observation (two to three pages): Reflect on your thoughts and feelings after a minimum of 1 hour spent with the cultural group you have identified for your immersion. What did you feel entering this experience, and how did these feelings change over time? What judgments or biases came up for you? Which of your senses were heightened? What was it like to be the minority in this situation?
3. Final journal (three to four pages): After a minimum of 7 hours spent with this population during the action portion, reflect on changes to your awareness, knowledge, and skills related to this cultural group. This could include discussion about your experience as a minority, what you learned about yourself, and ways you hope to grow in the future.

Researchers and Trustworthiness

The third author, the course instructor, did not participate in data analysis until the course had concluded and grades were submitted. The first author was a doctoral student at the time of the study, and the second author is a professor who instructs primarily doctoral students. The first two authors did not have oversight responsibilities for any participants at the time of the study. All three discussed their orientation toward CI and pertinent personal experiences to bracket their expectations and potential biases. The first author is a White cisgender woman who had previously participated in a formal CI project, assigned an abbreviated version to undergraduates, and facilitated process groups for counseling students completing CI. These experiences led her to believe that CI can be transformative when undertaken with intentionality. The second author, a White cisgender woman, experienced an abbreviated group immersion experience during her doctoral program, with limited opportunities for processing. As a supervisor, she observed students' efforts to provide culturally competent services, often referring back to their CI. She wanted to better understand mechanisms that propelled students' hesitations, challenges, and strivings to grow their cultural understandings. The third author, a Black cisgender woman, had several years of experience watching the journey of students completing CI. She expected to see a range of student engagement, emotions, motivations, and outcomes. She witnessed the positive impact that CI can have on students if they are open to the process. Collectively, we managed these assumptions and experiences by speaking transparently about them and establishing consensus. We also spoke to relationship and power dynamics as members of the same counseling program.

Data Analysis

We labeled each journal with its ID number and a code letter to indicate type of entry and then analyzed each type separately and sequentially. Hill (2012) described a CQR-modified (CQR-M) approach for analyzing brief, simple written qualitative responses. Given that the journal entries were written yet complex, we followed either CQR-M or CQR steps, depending on which was more rigorous and thorough. Accordingly, we carried out the three steps of CQR (we did not skip writing core ideas, as suggested in CQR-M for written responses; Hill, 2012): (a) grouping students' written entries into domains informed by a priori proposed domains, (b) deriving core ideas to summarize the essence of the domains, and (c) cross-analyzing to construct common categories across journals. Starting with proposal journals, the first two authors independently reviewed a randomly selected group of three proposals to identify domains and then met to reach consensus, following the same procedure with additional sets of three proposals until they achieved a stable list of domains. With these same procedures, they constructed core ideas and common categories (cross-analysis) for each domain in proposal journal entries, meeting frequently to reach consensus at each juncture of work. They coded observation and final entries following these same procedures. Although CQR-M typically does not require an auditor (Hill, 2012), given the nuanced and emotional nature of the responses, the first and second authors asked the third author to serve in this role. The third author reviewed and critiqued the domains and categories, not for affirmation but for alternative ways the data could be conceptualized. The auditor determined that the codes were an appropriate fit for the established categories and highlighted meaningful patterns. Her insights as course instructor and ability to take a broad perspective of the codes allowed her to provide detailed comments that informed discussion of the pathways. Finally, we incorporated CQR-M and CQR recommendations by reporting both percentages and labels (e.g., general, typical) for journals that included statements representative of each category.

Findings

Our analysis resulted in three domains (motivation for choosing population, key learning processes, and outcomes of immersion experience) and 14 categories (see Table 1). The domains parallel journal prompts submitted following each MAP phase. Thus, in our presentation of findings we describe development across time and reflect how students' learning can occur at different paces. For example, motivations were discussed in proposal journals corresponding to early ideas about the CI, and again later in observation and final journals as students became more vulnerable. A description of ideas expressed by students in each area and exemplar quotations follow. Students' responses sometimes fell under more than one category within each domain (Hill, 2012), therefore percentages do not total 100 across categories by domain.

TABLE 1. Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) Domains and Categories for Students' Immersion Journals

Domain and Category	PJ	OJ	FJ	Total		CQR Type
				<i>n</i>	%	
Domain 1: Motivation for choosing population						
Lack of knowledge/experience	22	2	1	25	80	Typical
Anticipatory feelings (e.g., uncomfortable/anxious, fear of being judged/excluded)	17	4	5	21	67	Typical

Domain and Category	PJ	OJ	FJ	Total		CQR Type
				n	%	
Stereotypes/biases (disclosed and not disclosed)	19	2	1	20	64	Typical
Personal reason for choosing population (e.g., curiosity, personal experience)	22	1	1	23	74	Typical
Professional reason for choosing population (e.g., future counseling work, multicultural competence)	19	0	2	19	61	Typical
Domain 2: Key learning processes						
Preconceptions/expectations about population	2	25	12	28	90	General
Exposure to new information/ideas/lifestyles	0	18	20	23	74	Typical
Interactions with others (positive, negative, neutral)	0	30	24	31	100	General
Reflections/internal dialogue	0	25	16	28	90	General
Domain 3: Outcomes of immersion experience						
New knowledge/information	1	14	20	25	80	Typical
Personal growth	1	23	27	30	96	General
New perspectives on others	0	23	30	31	100	General
Implications for counseling	0	6	24	24	77	Typical
Intentions for future/personal goals	0	4	25	26	83	Typical

Note. $N = 31$. Numbers indicate the number of students whose journals included the category. General indicates 90%–100%; typical indicates 50%–89%. PJ = proposal journal; OJ = observation journal; FJ = final journal.

Domain 1: Motivation for Choosing Population

In describing motivations for selecting their immersion population, students' responses varied in their degree of risk-taking or vulnerability in terms of owning personal bias, depth of sharing around their history with the population, as well as their overall investment in the assignment.

Lack of knowledge/experience. Responses in this category ($n = 25$, 80%) highlighted gaps where students had not had exposure or contact with the population. Often, students described this gap as a regrettable limitation, sometimes contrasting it with their experience interacting with members of other cultural groups. For example, one student described difficulty deciding on a gap in her experience, stating, “I have had the blessing of experiencing many different populations and being pushed out of my comfort zone quite frequently.” Two described how they were “ignorant” of traditions and values of Asian people or would like to “end my ignorance” about the Muslim faith, suggesting they saw lack of knowledge as detrimental and thus a primary motivator for choosing their immersion population.

Anticipatory feelings. Students ($n = 21$, 67%) cited feelings of discomfort, uncertainty, and anxiety to engage with the population as motivators. Their learning goal was broadly to “stretch” themselves beyond their “comfort zone,” which often meant pushing past fears that they would be excluded, judged, or not accepted by the group. On occasion, students referenced previous experiences to provide context to their discomfort. For example, one student had “reluctance and internal noise” when working with students with disabilities at her job. Another student described feeling “eager yet nervous” to immerse (in this case with Latino/a/x individuals) yet having the conviction that “[I] need to gain comfort interacting with people different from myself.”

Stereotypes/biases. Students ($n = 20$, 64%) alluded to the influence of prejudice on their identified cultural groups (e.g., bias that older adults are less capable could lead student to act in patronizing ways), with an emphasis on challenging bias as it arose during the immersion. Most did not explicitly discuss their own biases (e.g., “spontaneous thoughts” that come up “when confronted” with Muslim people are “less than what I would like for them to be”); rather, they identified stereotypes held by others, including society at large or family. For example, one student said, “I heard the stereotype about Black men was that they were either sexualized or villainized.... It was something I wanted to check for in my own thinking.” Students also made statements such as, “It's hard to acknowledge my bias, because I know it doesn't come from a rational place at all. Nonetheless, it's still there and I really need to confront it” (referring to discomfort and shame around avoiding people with disabilities).

Personal reason for choosing population. Personal curiosity or interest and previous experiences also motivated students ($n = 23$, 74%) to select a CI population. These reasons varied in terms of depth. A student who desired to learn more about LGBTQ+ identities referred to her own family's struggle to accept her cousin's transition from female to male in light of their conservative Christian worldview. She described the “shockwaves” that her family experienced as well as her avoidance of pronouns, despite knowing which pronouns he preferred. Another student, who also chose to immerse herself with LGBTQ+ people, described how her frustration as a Black woman hearing messages that “gay is the new Black” or that racism and homophobia are equivalent oppressions “clouded my ability to empathize” with this population's struggles. In both cases, these students described their own positionality, how it shaped their previous interactions with this cultural group, as well as a personally motivated desire to change. As an example with less depth, a student connected their “long-standing interest and curiosity in Buddhism” as a personal reason motivating their CI selection.

Professional reason for choosing population. Students ($n = 19$, 61%) described how planning for future clients or growth in multicultural and social justice counseling competence motivated their CI decisions. For example, one school counseling student noted that it would be important to effectively work with immigrants. She went on to question a previous preference to work with students who were similarly situated to herself, expressing a “newfound desire” to advocate and flexibly adapt her services. Some students identified systemic issues facing their identified population (e.g., rise in discrimination toward Muslims) whereas others focused more on professional development (e.g., how to appropriately address religion in session so that counselor discomfort does not affect performance or negatively impact therapeutic relationship).

Domain 2: Key Learning Processes

Throughout their journal entries (mostly found in the observation and final journals), students documented the elements of their immersion experience that catalyzed development. In these statements, students explored an event, whether internal or external, and its impact on their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Preconceptions/expectations about population. Part of students' preparation to enter the immersion activity or environment seemed to involve reflection about what they might encounter, either in terms of the outing itself or ideas about their chosen population (28 students,

90%). A mixture of nervousness and excitement often accompanied students imagining what it would be like to enter a new environment or interact with people unknown to them. Students claimed preconceptions about the population to varying degrees, with some sharing newly uncovered biases and others summarizing the biases they were aware their family or mainstream cultural outlets perpetuated. These reactions and additional sharing about biases (beyond the initial journal and motivation domain) were often slightly more vulnerable or immediate in that they were springing into the foreground as students prepared for the assignment. This student quote captures the layered emotions of nervousness and excitement as well as a more direct statement of biases:

As I went into the experience ... I was nervous because I wasn't sure what to expect.... I was excited because I want to learn and grow as a counselor and person.... My religious background always told me that it was wrong to be transgender, and I believed that.

Similarly, students' feelings of nervousness and worry differed in how pointed or vague they were (e.g., nervous for new experience vs. nervous to use incorrect pronouns or gendered language). Alternatively, students wondered about how their presence would be felt and perhaps alter the setting or the comfort of people around them. Sometimes students took steps to make themselves more inconspicuous or to conform to customs they imagined the population might expect of members (e.g., dress conservatively to enter mosque; dress up to enter Asian-owned establishment). In later journal entries, students often spoke of their preconceptions in order to modify them (e.g., expected homeless people to be mostly middle-age men but met women and children of various ages as well; felt more comfortable interacting with others in a school for newly immigrated youth). One student described how having more knowledge about the Jewish custom she was to participate in helped her feel “not very anxious.”

Exposure to new information/ideas/lifestyles. This category ($n = 23, 74\%$) represents students' efforts to consolidate new knowledge or react to new content gleaned about the population they selected for immersion, often during events they attended (e.g., learning about polyamory at a panel on queering relationships). At times, the new ideas marked similarities they shared with this group. While at a Christian bible study, one student noted, “The messages the small group leader shared were all about being selfless and unconditionally loving people for who they are, which are messages that I very much agree with.” This student felt amazed by her ability to appreciate the similarities because she had also been exposed to aspects of Christian beliefs that were harmful to her or opposed to her worldview. Other times, new information contrasted with the student's perspective or lifestyle, as in this case where a student described his reactions to unfamiliar places and things:

Most of the décor in the restaurant was made up of symbols and pictures I did not understand. There were several images of bulls, as well as a few depictions of people in traditional Asian dress carrying packs on their shoulders. For some reason, these images made me somewhat uncomfortable. I think this is mostly because I did not know what they meant. As a member of the dominant culture I have grown up in, I am accustomed to knowing what most images in public spaces are referring to. The experience of being put in a place where I did not comprehend much of my surroundings was rather jarring for

me. I found that my tendency was to try to figure out what all of the pictures meant to ease my tension, rather than to simply remain in the uncertainty.

This student's response to unfamiliar surroundings is noteworthy because he recognized his privileged perspective and considered what it was like to be in an environment where he was the “other” and to be exposed to perspectives that were not rooted in his dominant cultural identity. Similarly, a student made this comment about her time at a Pride festival:

Being around people where gender norms and objectification are not accepted or expected evoked positive emotions in me due to my upbringing placing a large emphasis on modesty and shame around sexuality. Beyond what I could concretely see with my eyes, there was a freedom that existed at this event that I rarely see. It was contagious.

In gaining exposure to new ideas/lifestyles/information, students often made comparisons to their preconceptions or their own worldviews in order to begin synthesizing the experience.

Interactions with others. Students' ($n = 31$, 100%) engagement with people at the event or setting constituted the largest key learning process category. Interactions included direct conversation, student expectations about how others perceived them, or evaluations of how an interaction was going. These statements differed in their valence, with some being quite positive, others negative, and some in between. As soon as students entered the immersion environment, they often began interpreting the behaviors—both verbal and nonverbal—of people around them. Two described their hypervigilance and sense that they stood out as different (at a Latin grocer and lunch counter):

I walked into the building and immediately identified my discomfort at being in the ethnic minority ... did my best to hide this truth from those around me.... I reminded myself that I had no reason to be uncomfortable and that people of a minority race experience this feeling often.

Additionally, another participant (in a school office serving immigrants and refugees) commented,

I attempted to send a smile their way, but it was only returned with more stares.... I began to feel self-conscious, but I soon realized they may have been new to the school, therefore the country as well, and were likely curious about my style of dress or way of being in comparison to their own.

Both students expressed new empathy for members of minoritized groups and responded to thoughts they would be rejected with alternative, more nuanced, interpretations. This process of acclimating to the environment by letting discomfort pass and seeking interactions to feel included was repeated across many student journals. Sometimes, students explicitly mentioned power dynamics, as in the case of a student who immersed in a shelter for women and children who were housing insecure. This student critiqued how women residents were positioned as receiving “services” from mostly “middle-class White women” volunteers in which “the subtext seemed to be, ‘Look what we have done for you, aren't you grateful?’” Given this backdrop, the

student noticed how she “felt nervous about asking or saying the wrong thing that would bring attention to the differences between us. I didn't want to make them uncomfortable by drawing attention to their poverty and homelessness, nor did I want to appear clueless and insensitive.”

Interaction with others also promoted appreciation for within-group diversity. One student immersing with people of Asian descent noted the significance of home country to variations in language, practices, and appearances. A student who immersed within Muslim culture was exposed to variations in how different Muslim women interpreted and wore (or did not wear) the *hijab* (veil or covering), sparking appreciation for diversity and choice within a cultural group, as opposed to her initial view of Muslim women as a static, monolithic group. This same student adorned a head covering in public and reflected on the lack of safety she felt from non-Muslims, an experience that demonstrated the insecurity that Islamophobia can breed. The joy that can come from making a connection with another person was showcased across student journals: “This conversation was really cathartic and humbling, and I was moved by how willing and open this person was to be transparent about their experiences”; “I immediately noticed and was inspired by the strong sense of community”; and “I began a conversation with a local Latina artist... She and I connected over our love of creating art with our hands.”

Reflections/internal dialogue. Students ($n = 28$, 90%) shared thoughts about what they observed and felt in a “stream of consciousness” fashion, an aspect of the journals that appeared to help students assign meaning to their experiences. In other words, students described how they were coming to understand what they were seeing and doing, through perspective taking or raising critiques. One student realized (Buddhist meditation group):

I felt vulnerable with this group of strangers, these unfamiliar practices, and the silence in the room that felt so loud. And because of these feelings within myself, I started making assumptions about other people as a way to distract from my own uncomfortability.

As students continued to reflect, they articulated empathy for the ways in which minoritized groups are not catered to in dominant spaces (e.g., foodstuffs or products not being carried in nonspecialty grocery stores) or are compared against what is imagined to be “normal.” One student noted feeling the need to hide their Christianity when among a predominantly Muslim group of people to blend in or avoid criticism. Through an interaction with an immigrant student whose second language was English, another student came to challenge her assumption that lack of English proficiency equated with lower intelligence or capacity for understanding.

In addition, students' internal monologues during the CI also served as probes to deepen self-awareness. As one student approached an event for transgender-identified people, she noticed feelings of embarrassment and worry surface. She described wanting to remain “unnoticed” and getting curious about the level of discomfort she felt, saying she was having “all the *wrong* thoughts that [she] could not silence.” Her feelings of sympathy led her to interrogate how her worry about being “politically correct” left her feeling inauthentic, overly careful, and “trying too hard.” Managing these varied thoughts and feelings helped her consider what would be needed to more genuinely interact with members of this community.

Domain 3: Outcomes of Immersion Experience

Student learning outcomes were captured in the following categories, ranging from informational to emotional and transformative to mobilizing future action.

New knowledge/information. Throughout the immersion, students ($n = 25$, 80%) gained new knowledge in the way of more objective information, facts, or content about the population. Knowledge was often stated as “takeaways” or more firm understandings from across the experience and following exposure to new lifestyles and information (key learning process). Facts could include acquiring new language (e.g., “queer” as a reclaimed term) or concepts (e.g., symbolism in synagogue service). Students also developed understanding for practices or customs associated with each population (e.g., the Day of the Dead involves merging of indigenous Mexican and Catholic traditions; significance of traditional Asian dress; Rosh Hashana marks the start of the Jewish New Year), as well as exposure to common issues or difficulties overcome by the group (e.g., impact of White beauty standards on Black women and girls, language barriers and use of translators).

Personal growth. The personal growth category captured students arriving at new understandings of themselves, their worldview, and/or their privileges relative to other people ($n = 30$, 96%). Multiple students identified how their previous gap, discomfort, or bias was related to fears that they could not communicate or establish connection with group members (“I find enjoyment and comfort in interacting with students and people with whom I can communicate effectively”), with some students reflecting on their strategies for managing discomfort toward the unknown (e.g., “Generally speaking, I gather as much information as possible so I am prepared, don't make a fool of myself, and don't offend anybody”). Others reacted with embarrassment or self-criticism about misconceptions they had about group members (e.g., “it is becoming clearer to me that I have held a deep-rooted fear of a population [Muslims] solely because I didn't understand them and did not have a desire to understand them”).

Many students described self-examination and developing understanding of their personal privilege, often noting how their culture being represented or catered to was something they “take for granted.” This insight had slightly different expressions depending on whether one of the student's primary identities was privileged or marginalized:

As a White person, who has the luxury of experiencing this discomfort [of standing out] less frequently than those in minority races, I tried to hold onto what I felt and allow that experience to do its work on my cultural-conscious[ness] and empathy for others.

Others in privileged positions identified how this “shielded” them from oppression impacting marginalized groups (e.g., “the Jewish community has had to consistently combat anti-Semitism”). Insight around other oppressions developed for students belonging to minoritized statuses, for salient identities such as race/ethnicity, as well. One Black student said,

I was feeling nervous and uncomfortable because I was as a member of the majority, coming into a space that a minority group created for themselves. As a cisgender

heterosexual woman, I am the one in a privileged position coming into a space that was not created for me ... rightfully so.

Here, empathy toward LGBTQ+ people stemmed from understanding that it is important to have spaces where marginalized group members can filter out pressures or expectations from dominant group members, perhaps centralizing their needs or values and allowing for more free dialogue. Additionally, this student experienced dissonance when seeing herself as holding a privileged identity status in this context, whereas in many other contexts her Black identity is primarily salient and marginalized by others (e.g., she is studying in a predominantly White institution). Another student noted being “shocked” by the thoughts, feelings, and growth she experienced, even as someone “accustomed to being an outsider.” Finally, some students grappled with how their personal growth would carry forward:

Sadly, I could choose to lose interest in being an ally for racial minorities ... to avoid the discomfort I felt in these assignments and step back into the feelings of safety I feel when communicating with mostly people from my own race. I could go on living my entire life and face very little personal consequences if I chose to never return to this topic.

Students appreciated, to varying degrees, how they could opt in or out of continued learning.

New perspectives on others. Students ($n = 31$, 100%) challenged the ideas they initially carried about others, including fears, discomfort, and biases. At times, this category overlapped with the personal growth category, given that insight about oneself had implications for how one interacted with or perceived others and vice versa; however, the insights gleaned about others categorized here were more focused on updating or broadening ideas about people who are different from the student. For example, students reported viewing members of their immersion population with greater empathy, which allowed students to appreciate challenges faced by this group as well as universality or shared qualities across people. One described a growing “understanding of how intimidating it must be for families to come to a completely different country with a vastly different language and culture from their home country and attempt to construct their lives from scratch.” This student concluded, “We are all human beings and can find enjoyment in similar activities, despite language or cultural differences,” balancing perceived differences with perceived similarities. Similarly, a student who attended an LGBTQ+ forum learned about “vulnerable” topics and noted, “I would not appreciate if every time I talked about my romantic relationship, I had to explain the dynamics, then respond to numerous questions, while anticipating judgment.” Students also described how developing new perspectives about others created connections and identification (e.g., overlap between Latinx Día de Los Muertos and Jewish Shiva; “It is wonderful how different cultures can be so similar in their traditions”).

When students challenged themselves around biases (e.g., one student noted how they had previously been “buying into the stereotype of the homeless as criminals, [or] dangerous”) they made way for new, perhaps unexpected, experiences with group members:

Hearing the sister's story of dropping out of high school to care for their mentally ill mother, unemployment, and their descent into homelessness helped me to realize that, for

many, the forces that often bring the homeless into homelessness are external and societal, and getting out of that vicious cycle can often be near impossible.

This new set of stories about cultural group members allowed for an expanded sense of within-group diversity (not to “overgeneralize” with observations during the immersion experience) as well as an appreciation for contextual factors impacting daily life. Some students condemned the way messages about a given cultural group can be baseless or lack balance (e.g., “I wish the media spent more time reflecting on these moments [Muslims engaged in fellowship and prayer] instead of focusing on the violence of radical terrorists. My Muslim friends condemn violence in the strongest way”). Social interaction helped students move beyond “head knowledge” toward more real connection. The student immersing with Latino/a/x individuals stated, “The realization of my enjoyment of my own privilege was difficult to swallow. This class—and this assignment specifically—have played a role in moving me further down a path toward not just cultural competence, but authenticity.”

These takeaways enabled students to see differences between themselves and others as important yet less threatening and to feel gratitude for how they were welcomed. Importantly, students were not always embraced (though rejection or receiving criticism from group members was rare), and they sometimes did find evidence of their assumptions or critiques about the group (e.g., sexism among faith group). Students who were able to balance these experiences with more pleasant and/or countervailing evidence tended to still express more well-rounded, complex understandings of the population (e.g., examples of feminism and gender equity in faith group), despite initially viewing what they considered to be evidence for their assumptions.

Implications for counseling. Students ($n = 24$, 77%) expressed intentions for their work as counselors, ranging from how to apply new perspectives about themselves and others to resources to better serve members of their communities. Students discussed intentions to serve as an ally (e.g., build relationships with community groups) or anticipate needs of future clients (e.g., advocate for programs to support students with intellectual or developmental disabilities in navigating higher education). One student planned to “pair students who are in a vulnerable or minority population of any kind with relatable resources in the school to build up their confidence and understanding of school-related information,” based on her observation that students new to the United States benefited from connecting with recent immigrants from their home countries.

Students also reflected on the importance of managing discomfort with future clients' worldviews in order to better serve them or to maintain a client-centered approach (e.g., “I need to work on not taking things personally, particularly in working with Black clients who may react negatively to a White counselor”; plans to process discomfort about gender attitudes independently from the client). The underlying message for many students involved humility and being open-minded to continued learning, challenging themselves around notions of superiority or the objectivity of their own worldview, “I must ... allow my students to tell their own stories without filling in their lives with what I think I know about them”; and “as a person and as a counselor, I can never assume I know more than they [do] about how they experience life.... And, when I do earn their trust, I am ethically and morally bound to preserve it.”

Intentions for the future/personal goals. Students ($n = 26, 83\%$) also explored how they could continue to pursue connections with people beyond their social location and build capacity for allyship. Some identified another group of people that they would like to immerse with or expressed interest in continued engagement in immersion events or organizations. Another put this more generally: “I feel like I've come to a place of awareness where I can make more intentional and conscious decisions about challenging my biases and acknowledging gaps in my understanding.” Two students expanded on this notion by planning to challenge their automatic assumptions (e.g., people with disabilities require assistance and lack autonomy) and analyze the origins of biases (e.g., media, family). Others set intentions that, while in groups to which they belong, they would be “hospitable” and welcoming to people from outside those groups who are interested in learning about them. Finally, students acknowledged unfinished emotional processing important to their ability to connect effectively across lines of identity and power difference; for example, one student described feeling anger, fear, and blame during the immersion when interacting with members of the Black community, particularly when her Whiteness was challenged, and how these emotions could constitute a microaggression.

Discussion

Our summary of domains and categories demonstrates how, although students individually tailored their CI experiences and invested in them to different degrees, similar developmental pathways unfolded with direct connections to multicultural and social justice counseling competencies. These pathways played out across student positionalities and immersion populations or activities, again suggesting the relevance of CI for all counselors (King et al., 2019). Prominent—although not exhaustive—developmental pathways included (a) reflection was a means to self-regulate, resolve cognitive dissonance, or alter student concepts of identity, power, and difference; (b) gaining knowledge in real-world contexts allowed students to consider individual-, group-, and universal-level experiences (e.g., exceptions or within-group differences); (c) perspective taking during interactions supported growth in empathy and cultural humility; (d) engaging with diverse “others” facilitated insights about personal values and worldview; (e) motivation for undertaking the particular immersion was often clarified during the activity, with students increasingly able to name and grapple with the weight of their biases; and (f) students' appreciation for their current limitations deepened and converted into desire for continued cross-cultural learning.

The largest categories of analysis were those with the most depth and vividness: interactions with others (process) and new perspectives on self and others (outcomes). Within these categories, we often found students having revelatory or “aha” moments with implications beyond the specific scenario they were describing. These moments informed students' salient takeaways from the experience, marking a paradigm shift (e.g., from cultural difference as inferior or threatening to cultural difference as difference). Such learning outcomes seemed to go beyond reducing bias to a more expansive change in how difference in general was understood. This change tended to surface in students' final journals where cognitive dissonance or uncomfortable emotions were resolved into broader takeaways (Pathway A). In contrast, information gained about a group (outcome: multicultural and social justice counseling competence knowledge) was generally beneficial yet relatively superficial, with less space devoted to reflection on its impact. Students often noted such information to provide detail about their surroundings (e.g., setting, event) or

the nature of their interactions. Thus, growth toward cultural knowledge seemed to occur at a more basic level, and their new knowledge as well as their previous assumptions could even be challenged by examples of within-group diversity (e.g., perceived performance expectations among Asian Americans and variability in academic achievement; perceived significance of the hijab and differences in its interpretation or adoption). CI might be especially suited for students to gain new knowledge about a group while simultaneously realizing that this knowledge falls short or can, at worst, create caricatures that do not hold up in reality. In CI, students learn about trends and commonalities for a particular sociocultural group, as well as participate in interactions that guard against developing a monolithic view (Pathway B).

Sometimes new knowledge preceded students' interactions with immersion group members (e.g., as part of preparatory reading), whereas other times it was acquired through interactions (e.g., conversations, panels, services). Regardless, knowledge was a precursor to feelings of empathy, allowing genuinely new perspectives (of others). Students seemed to be developing cultural humility when they used new knowledge to de-center their perspective and appreciate that of a person with a different positionality (Pathway C; Barden & Cashwell, 2013). These moments in CI were more likely to prompt a paradigm shift (relative to “exposure to new information” on its own), as students realized the depth of some person or experience. When students reflected on content and process levels (e.g., learning about LGBTQ+ topics and perspective taking around the toll it takes to explain identities or practices to uninformed others), what they learned transcended what can be read, viewed, or consumed; this learning hinged on their engagement with others.

Beyond knowledge, students gleaned new cultural self-awareness (Pathway D; outcome: multicultural and social justice counseling competence awareness) through their interactions with others, which regularly prompted further reflection (process). In comparing themselves with those around them in the CI, students uncovered personal qualities or views they previously had taken for granted as the norm (e.g., style of dress, language). Similarly, students became aware of areas of privilege, the relative ease with which they move through the world, and how their surroundings reflect and value them (e.g., catered to in mainstream settings, beauty standards defined by dominant culture). This finding reinforces that growth in awareness can take place on both macro- and microlevels (Shannonhouse et al., 2015). At times, students' discomfort led them to develop fearful interpretations of others (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2011). With self-awareness of this discomfort, students reframed their interpretations in constructive ways (e.g., harsh stares become curious looks). In some cases, students observed that when they wanted to shrink away from differences and inequities, they felt frozen and blocked from connection with others (e.g., feeling unsure about how to approach topic of SES led to uncomfortable silence).

Many participants' motivation for selecting the population in which they immersed themselves came into sharper focus as they encountered preconceptions upon entering the immersion environment (learning process; Prosek & Michel, 2016), with some students even able to own their prejudicial views (e.g., views of trans people as “confused”; Pathway E). Moments when students acknowledged their biases were injected with strong emotionality (e.g., calling their own thoughts “extreme”; felt “shockwaves”), as they often criticized themselves, or mainstream culture (e.g., news sources, popular media), for having such views at the outset of the CI. Students who contrasted their beliefs pre and post the CI in their final journal seemed to have

connected their learning outcomes to their motivations for undertaking this immersion in meaningful ways. Students identified how contact with members of the cultural group filled in gaps in knowledge while guarding against stereotyping, eased anticipatory feelings through habituation to discomfort, and helped develop new perspectives of self/others that fundamentally altered their approach to cross-cultural work (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009).

Finally, many students stated they were determined to engage in action and advocacy efforts in the future in light of their CI (Pathway E; outcomes: implications for counseling, intentions for the future/personal goals). Multiple students stated their intention to keep “stretching” (e.g., “Now that I have started, I don't want to stop!”) and to be welcoming and warm toward people who enter spaces where they are of the dominant culture. An understanding of multicultural and social justice counseling competence growth as lifelong and requiring effort and commitment is consistent with previous research (Atkins et al., 2017). These commitments were often spurred by gratitude toward people who had been inviting and engaging with them. Some students outlined new community organizations, resources, and supports that might be beneficial to future clients. Others reflected on structural barriers members of the cultural population could face (e.g., xenophobia, anti-Semitism) and a desire to join with others to impact these social issues.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study's limitations should be considered along with these findings. First, the study context was a first-semester multicultural course within a full-time counseling program in the Southeast. Students in a different context or region might choose (or have access to) other populations and describe different motivations, learning processes, and outcomes. Other researchers might explore the accuracy of our findings with students completing different CI activities. Next, given the large number of journals analyzed, it was impossible to represent all of the students' responses and the nuances within them. Across the findings, we included quotations that represented the range of CI populations and variety of events (e.g., public parade, one-on-one meeting). Although we feel confident in the longitudinal learning experience described, we could not reflect the uniqueness of each student's journey. Future researchers could explore such distinctions, particularly those of subgroups based on the characteristics of the students (e.g., majority vs. minoritized identities; King, 2020) and the CI populations (e.g., race/ethnicity, religious affiliation/belief systems, visible vs. invisible identity). They also might explore students' reflections in relation to measures of relevant variables (e.g., humility, cultural empathy; Atkins et al., 2017; Shannonhouse et al., 2015). Follow-up studies are necessary to determine the ongoing impact of CI, including multicultural and social justice counseling competence with clients and involvement in social justice advocacy.

Implications

Counselor educators should be aware that students' motivations for selecting a CI experience vary in terms of specificity, application to their future careers, and personal resonance and that these motivations could become clearer as they are interacting. Although such exercises as drafting a CI proposal is meant to prompt honest exploration of biases and learning needs, educators can also be reassured that even those students who described relatively superficial motivations had eye-opening experiences beyond their expectations (e.g., student who planned to

provide food/water to homeless individuals shifted her views about poverty after feeling moved by people's stories). To challenge students to deepen their motivation or more concretely target growth, instructors can also make behavioral recommendations (e.g., to strike up a conversation with someone at the event) or ask probing questions (e.g., “How are members of this cultural group similar to and different from you/each other?”).

The role of reflection and internal dialogue as key learning processes suggests that counselor educators should provide intentional opportunities for students to make meaning of their CI (Barden & Cashwell, 2013; Shannonhouse et al., 2015). Journal-based reflection provides a relatively private space for students to document CI events and internal reactions and to process aha moments or paradigm shifts. Given how students endorsed similar developmental experiences in their journals within this study, group discussions could be well suited to normalize cognitive dissonance or discomfort and provide mutual support. Within groups, the facilitator, or perhaps group members who are more advanced in their development, might model more well-rounded and humble conclusions about the identified cultural group. In this way, students can begin to articulate new perspectives on cultural differences in general and consider how learning outcomes from CI transfer to other cross-cultural relationships.

Students and counselors pursuing CI should maintain an engaged and open stance toward their own thoughts and feelings as well as their interactions with others (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). As noted, CI can present conflicting information (e.g., knowledge of group norms and examples of departures from the norm), discomfort toward feeling like an outsider, or new observations that challenge personal worldview (e.g., the world is just and orderly). With curiosity and reflection, students and counselors can practice holding a more cognitively complex view of themselves and others. Reflecting on the growth-fostering and exciting aspects of immersion (Atkins et al., 2017; King et al., 2019), seeking support from a trusted person, and applying mindfulness or emotion regulation skills may help them to tolerate the possible dissonance and discomfort along the way. Honest analysis of thoughts and feelings (e.g., defensiveness, humility) that surface throughout CI can help students and counselors consider how they are relating to the experience of being “in the minority.” Such reflection can aid in translating their internal and external experiences into meaningful learning outcomes.

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