

Enhancing Critical Consciousness Through a Cross-Cultural Immersion Experience in South Africa

Kyoung Mi Choi, Richard W. VanVoorhis, and Audrey E. Ellenwood

Using phenomenological approaches, the author explored the meanings and essences of a cross-cultural immersion experience in South Africa among counseling master's-level students. Five core themes—the meaning of being American, sociopolitical awareness, engagement with South Africans and their communities, appreciation of life, and commitment to change—characterized the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1973, 2000). Findings support positive influences of cross-cultural immersion as an experiential pedagogical method for multicultural development.

Keywords: immersion, critical consciousness, South Africa

Usando enfoques fenomenológicos, se exploraron los significados y esencias de una experiencia de inmersión transcultural en Sudáfrica entre estudiantes de nivel máster en consejería. Cinco temas centrales (el significado de ser estadounidense, la conciencia sociopolítica, la interacción con individuos sudafricanos y sus comunidades, la valoración de la vida y el compromiso con el cambio) caracterizaron el desarrollo de la conciencia crítica (Freire, 1973, 2000). Los hallazgos confirman influencias positivas de la inmersión transcultural como un método pedagógico basado en la experiencia para el desarrollo multicultural.

Palabras clave: inmersión, conciencia crítica, Sudáfrica

In 2011–2012, approximately 283,332 U.S. students studied abroad for academic credit. This number reflects a 3% increase compared with the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2013). Leading destinations for study abroad among U.S. students are the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France, and China, which combined account for 43% of the total students in study abroad programs.

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of U.S. study abroad students traveling to Africa. In 2000–2001, 4,471 U.S. study abroad students studied in Africa compared with 13,974 students in 2010–2011 (Berdan, Goodman, & Taylor, 2013). Cultural differences between the United States and Africa challenge study abroad students to step outside of their comfort zones and develop cultural awareness and sensitivity (Ellenwood & Snyders,

Kyoung Mi Choi, Department of Counselor Education and Rehabilitation, California State University, Fresno; Richard W. VanVoorhis and Audrey E. Ellenwood, Department of Counseling, Special Education, and School Psychology, Youngstown State University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kyoung Mi Choi, Department of Counselor Education and Rehabilitation, California State University, Fresno, 5005 North Maple Avenue, Fresno, CA 93740-8025 (e-mail: kchoi@cusfresno.edu).

2006). Witnessing the massive challenges faced by many people in Africa, including extreme poverty, illness, malnutrition, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, regional conflicts, and lack of education, encourages U.S. students to become conscious about social issues around the world (Ellenwood & Snyders, 2006; West-Olatunji, Goodman, Mehta, & Templeton, 2011).

In the field of counselor education, study abroad and other types of international immersion programs have been used to facilitate multicultural awareness and counseling among students. This is important considering the fact that understanding and appreciating multiculturalism is a core element of counselor training curricula. This study applies critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1973, 2000) to explore the process of a short-term international immersion experience among graduate-level counseling students in South Africa. Results indicate that participants expressed development in their perception of themselves and the world from a more naïve view to critical consciousness. This result was achieved through reflection about the meaning of being American, becoming aware of sociopolitical issues, engaging with South Africans and local communities, becoming appreciative of life, and making a commitment to change. Recommendations for counselor educators focus on provisions of appropriate ongoing supervision throughout the immersion experience as a way to facilitate the transformation process.

review of the literature

MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCY

Understanding and appreciating multiculturalism is a core element of counselor training curricula (Pedersen, 1988, 1991). The counseling accreditation bodies and professional associations emphasize and have integrated multicultural competencies into their accreditation processes and standards. For instance, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) guidelines and principles require master's-level counseling students to develop and demonstrate substantial understanding and competence with regard to issues of social and cultural diversity. These include, but are not limited to, age, ability, ethnicity, gender, language, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

The American Counseling Association (ACA; 2014) also has included having an awareness and sensitivity toward multicultural and diversity issues in their ethical standards. Additionally, understanding disaster response and crisis intervention as well as principles of social justice are an integral part of professional training for counseling students. Recent counseling scholarship has emphasized the importance of multiculturally competent counselors to meet the growing need of mental health service in the global world (West-Olatunji et al., 2011).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN MULTICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

A cultural immersion experience has been defined as “direct, prolonged, in vivo contact with a culture different from that of the trainees” (Pope-Davis,

Breaux, & Liu, 1997, p. 232). Cultural immersion experiences stress a great engagement with a culture accompanied by investing time, energy, and concentration (Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009). In helping-profession disciplines, cultural immersion experiences have been addressed as a pedagogical approach to multicultural learning (e.g., Canfield, Low, & Hovestadt, 2009; Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009; Crampton, Dowell, Parkin, & Thompson, 2003; Fawcett, Briggs, Maycock, & Stine, 2010; Plante, Lackey, & Hwang, 2009; Ponterotto, 1997; Pope-Davis, Breaux, & Liu, 1997; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). Counselor educators have become interested in experiential modalities (e.g., cross-cultural immersion trips, community service activities, other hands-on cross-cultural experiences) to enhance students' multicultural development (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009; Fawcett et al., 2010; Plante et al., 2009; Ridley, Mendoza, & Kanitz, 1994). Positive outcomes of experiential training modalities, including enhancing cultural awareness, self-awareness of one's own culture, cultural empathy, critical consciousness, commitment to change, and social justice advocacy, have been identified (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Ishii, Gilbride, & Stensrud, 2009).

Furthermore, the literature has found that direct interaction with local people from diverse backgrounds and experiences in varying social contexts provide students with opportunities to examine their worldviews and assumptions, develop a sense of self-awareness with regard to cultural dimensions, and engage in social actions (Alvarez, 2001; Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Kim & Lyons, 2003; Nakanishi & Rittner, 1992; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Jon, & Josic, 2009; Ridley et al., 1994; Sodowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994). Burnett et al. (2004) stated that one of the strengths of participating in an immersion experience includes gaining a "great breadth and depth of experience by involving them [students] in social, political, cultural and environmental, and other important aspects of our collective community" (p. 181). The authors asserted that an immersion experience involving community-based service could enhance multicultural competencies through direct exposure to diverse cultural communities and action-oriented involvement. Their results showed that the direct encounters enabled students to gain experiential knowledge beyond mere observations or didactic methods (Burnett et al., 2004). In particular, additional international immersion or study abroad courses, along with the required standardized counseling curriculum, have shown the effectiveness in terms of increasing cultural responsiveness (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009), compassion (Plante et al., 2009), cultural awareness and sensitivity (Canfield et al., 2009), and disaster-response skills (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009; West-Olatunji et al., 2011).

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS THEORY

Critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1973, 2000) emphasizes education as a mutual process of liberation, as well as enablement of people to understand their

social and political responsibilities and roles within their reality. Learning through engagement with the world and developing a sense of agency are highlighted in the theory (Freire, 2000). Communication and dialogue are the vehicles of transforming the understanding of one's relations with the world and of critical actions to create changes within the world. Freire (1973, 2000) elaborated on different levels of consciousness, such as magic consciousness (i.e., a belief in a superior power and lack of awareness of injustice in one's life), naïve consciousness (i.e., awareness of problems yet distorted perceptions about the relations between oneself and reality), and critical consciousness (i.e., integration with reality and understanding of casual and circumstantial correlations between oneself and reality). Freire described different ways to understand authentic self and surroundings in the world. Freire (1973) asserted that the movement from naïve to critical consciousness is achieved through "an active, dialogical educational program concerned with social and political responsibility" (p. 19).

Previous studies (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009; West-Olatunji et al., 2011) showed that experiential learning and cross-cultural engagement enhance students' critical consciousness. Goodman and West-Olatunji (2009) explored cultural development among students who participated in an immersion experience involving a disaster-response outreach project in New Orleans, Louisiana. The results showed that the six graduate counseling students who participated in the experiential learning experience increased personal and cultural awareness and knowledge. The authors suggested critical consciousness (Freire, 2000) as a core ability to reflect on one's biases, to gain deeper understanding of complex social issues, and to take actions to advocate for social justice in multicultural learning. The study suggested that an involvement of experiential learning experiences increased critical consciousness, which instilled cultural competence.

In another study, West-Olatunji et al. (2011) explored cultural learning among six counseling students who participated in a 4-week immersion experience in South Africa using qualitative approaches. This immersion experience was based on an application of critical consciousness theory that attempted to facilitate critical thinking and enhance an understanding of social biases and oppression so that commitment to social justice may occur in multicultural learning. Direct encounters with the community and daily supervision improved cultural awareness of the participants.

In the current study, we used a transcendental phenomenological method (Moustakas, 1994) to explore the essence and meaning of the cultural learning process among graduate-level counseling students who participated in a South African cross-cultural immersion experience. Student narratives enhanced an understanding of themselves, their own culture, and the world. We recommend that counselor educators and researchers consider the design and conduct of cross-cultural immersion learning opportunities and related research.

method

This study was based on a short-term (14-day) study abroad class with nonprofit organization involvement that was designed to enhance cultural sensitivity

and empathy among students. These processes were facilitated by activities in which students reached out to underprivileged children and communities in a developing country through various experiential interventions and community services. A variety of educational, cultural, and field experiences were pedagogically designed to promote students' sense of multicultural confidence, skills, and ability to communicate with people from another country (see Table 1). Before traveling to South Africa, the graduate students spent 8 months gathering educational supplies and monetary donations for schools in the rural townships of South Africa through an existing student organization; they also read articles and information about South African culture and history.

During the cross-cultural immersion experience (May 15–29, 2011), local university professors, teachers, and mental health professionals interacted with the students and shared information on their work and perspectives on mental health and educational systems in South Africa. The students participated in educational charitable activities, which included delivering the gathered educational supplies to six primary schools and five preschools, providing momentary support to build a playground, sponsoring children for education, and meeting with community representatives to discuss their educational needs and the sociopolitical history of the communities and nation.

TABLE 1
Educational, Cultural, and Field Activities

Experience	Description and Example
Educational	<p>Exposure to the economic, educational, political, and social needs of people in South Africa by</p> <p>Reading articles regarding history, culture, and psychology of South Africa</p> <p>Visiting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robben Island in Cape Town • The Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria • The Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg <p>Meeting with local members of the Democratic Alliance party</p> <p>Attending lectures about political, economic, and social issues in South Africa</p> <p>Participating in guided tours into rural townships in the Knysna area</p> <p>Hand-delivering educational supplies and sports equipment to rural schools</p>
Cultural	<p>Exposure to various cultural activities by</p> <p>Meeting with local university professors and their family members</p> <p>Attending the Barnyard Theaters at the Menlyn Mall in Pretoria</p> <p>Participating in a traditional South African dinner</p> <p>Bartering for goods in local markets</p> <p>Shopping at local malls</p>
Field	<p>Experience a new environment and have an opportunity to learn about the ecological system in South Africa by</p> <p>Lodging and undertaking a safari experience at the Kruger National Park</p> <p>Diving with great white sharks</p> <p>Visiting Table Top Mountain</p> <p>Walking with elephants</p>

PARTICIPANTS

Five master's-level counseling students participated in this study. All participants attended a single, midsized university located in the midwestern part of the United States. Four of the participants were female and one was male. Participants' ethnic backgrounds were relatively homogenous; all participants were White Americans born and raised in the United States. Ages of participants ranged between 26 and 38 years. For three of the students, this was their first overseas experience. All of the students had taken at least one multicultural counseling course before the South African experience (see Table 2).

SAMPLING

Participants were recruited from an existing student organization that organizes fundraising events to support children in South Africa. Because institutional review board approval was required for the research component, we contacted the president of the student organization and asked for approval. The president informed the members of the student organization about the voluntary opportunity to participate in the research (snowball sampling). The president then gave each potential program participant a research packet prepared by us, including a cover letter, an informed consent letter, a demographic questionnaire, and a contact information sheet. The participant criteria information was also provided. There were three criteria for participant eligibility in the study: (a) enrolled as a graduate student in counseling, (b) participated in a cross-cultural immersion course in Summer 2011, and (c) willing to participate in a lengthy interview. Five students, who met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study, returned their informed consent and contact information sheet to us. They had all taken a summer course involving a cross-cultural immersion experience in South Africa as an elective toward their master's degree in counseling.

DATA COLLECTION

After students agreed to participate in the study and returned the informed consent, contact information sheet, and demographic questionnaires, they were individually interviewed. All of the interviews were conducted after 6 months of the cross-cultural immersion experience in South Africa.

TABLE 2
Participant Profile Overview

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity (Self-Described)	Previous Overseas Experience	Multicultural Course Taken Before Trip
Jenny	29	Female	White American	Yes	Yes
Anna	27	Female	White American	Yes	Yes
Beth	31	Female	White American	No	Yes
Katie	26	Female	White American	No	Yes
Jeffrey	38	Male	White American	No	Yes

As part of the interview, we explained the purpose and process of the phenomenological study. To be consistent with the goal of qualitative research, all participants' viewpoints were represented through a semistructured interview. The questions included the following: "What were your expectations of the immersion experience?" "What were your initial reactions to South Africa based on observations?" "What experiences stand out in your mind?" "What feelings were generated by this immersion experience?" "How would you compare the South African values, beliefs, and lifestyles to your own?" "How did the experience affect you?" "What changes do you associate with this immersion?" "What was the greatest challenge for you while in South Africa?" "How does the immersion experience affect your work with others or being a master's student in counseling?" and "What particular counseling skills or knowledge did you gain from this immersion experience?"

Interviews averaged 60 to 90 minutes and were audio recorded in their entirety, and audiotapes of the semistructured interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to be used in all written work. In addition to interview data, we collected demographic information.

DATA ANALYSIS

A transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994) was used for this study. The approach chosen enabled us to move beyond ordinary ways of perceiving the world and to extract the source of the meaning and essence of lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Wertz, 2005). The transcripts were imported into NVivo (QSR International, 2012), a qualitative data analysis software program. This program was used for data storage, coding and retrieval, and text analysis.

Moustakas's (1994) six steps for data analysis were used in this study: (a) we recognized that each and every statement has equal value and listed all statements; (b) we listed the unique qualities of the cross-cultural immersion experience described by the participants (invariant constituents or meaning units); (c) we derived 41 invariant constituents and clustered them into five themes; (d) we constructed individual textual and structural descriptions of each participant from the themes using phenomenological reflection and imaginative variation, which provides vivid descriptions and underlying dynamics of the experience; (e) we constructed a composite textual-structural description, which presented the participants as a whole and provided a way of understanding what they experienced as a collective experience; and (f) we integrated all of the composite textual-structural descriptions into a universal description and provided a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience as the final step of data analysis.

RESEARCHERS' ROLE AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF FINDINGS

The research team was comprised of three faculty members (a counselor educator and two school psychologists) employed by a counseling and school

psychology program in the midwestern United States. The primary researcher (the first author) is an Asian female assistant professor specialized in multicultural counseling and experiential learning in student affairs and college counseling. The other two researchers are White Americans (male and female) who specialize in school psychology. In a transcendental phenomenology, it is important to have a research topic or question that is both socially meaningful and personally significant to the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). The level of cross-cultural immersion and research experience among the three researchers varied (one researcher had extensive experience in organizing and leading numerous international immersion classes and trips for students and faculty, the other two had limited or no experience); however, all valued the importance of cross-cultural learning and experience in the development of multicultural competency and desired to expand their understanding of the topic. This mixed composition (i.e., age, race, ethnicity, degree of international education and research experience, academic discipline) of the research team contributed to the understanding of the complexity of students' experiences in South Africa.

In the qualitative research process, identification and suspension of the researcher's preconceptions are imperative (Moustakas, 1994). No preconceived themes or structure were imposed during this process. We used process notes to organize our assumptions while reviewing the data. This approach helped to facilitate our awareness of our perspectives throughout the data analysis process (Sheperis, Young, & Daniels, 2010).

Member checking and peer debriefing were incorporated to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sheperis et al., 2010). Peer debriefing helped us to recognize potential personal biases, which enhanced the credibility of findings. A peer debriefer, who was uninformed about multicultural counseling literature and the interview data, was invited to visually code and analyze the data. This additional coder enabled us to make comparisons across interpretations, consider different codes and meaning units, and identify potential biases in the coding process. The member-checking process also enhanced trustworthiness of the data. The primary researcher presented participants with emergent themes and interview content to ensure that they were in agreement with written comments. Upon verification of each transcript's accuracy, the audiotape was erased to ensure confidentiality of the subjects' identities.

results

Participants described various cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes before, during, and after the cross-cultural immersion experience. Five themes emerged: (a) the meaning of being American, (b) sociopolitical awareness, (c) engagement with South Africans and their local communities, (d) appreciation of life, and (e) commitment to change.

THE MEANING OF BEING AMERICAN

Having a geographical and cultural distance from their own culture provided an opportunity for participants to examine how they previously viewed and related to the world, as well as what they valued and believed. The immersion experience provided participants with an experience of being an outsider in a foreign country. It seemed as though experiencing a new culture initially made participants have feelings of excitement, apprehension, eagerness, and openness to the unknown. These initial emotional responses gradually seemed to be replaced with a mix of confusion, uneasiness, surprise, irritation, fear, frustration, and sadness as the participants started to witness different lifestyles, poverty, values, and political situations.

The differences between what they had previously known about themselves and the world and what they were experiencing seemed to compel the participants to use various cognitive mechanisms, such as contrasting, comparing, self-monitoring, and self-reflecting. In particular, comparisons between the United States and South Africa were prevalent. Anna described herself as being “very sheltered” in terms of how she previously saw the world. Jenny expressed that the immersion experience helped her become aware of her own biases and sense of entitlement as an American:

When I hear Americans saying things like “we need to feed our own first,” I know that they are not saying we shouldn’t help people in Africa. What they are really saying is Americans are more entitled to life than people in other countries. The awareness of Americans’ biases and entitlement and my own biases and entitlement is humbling. It helps me become grateful for what I have and what I can give to others.

Moreover, the participants became aware of how Americans were perceived and stereotyped. Jenny described her experience with a British journalist and feeling of discomfort when being mistreated based on the faulty assumptions about Americans:

We had an interview with a White correspondent for a local newspaper. It just seemed like she had a lot of assumptions about Americans. All she said was what was shown by the media. There was a lot of assumptions about how we felt and what we thought, rather than asking us and listening to what we had to say.

As the participants became aware of various stereotypes toward Americans, they tried to monitor their behaviors and not to reinforce those stereotypes. Jeffrey elaborated,

In my head, I was trying to think from their perspectives. They think Americans are loud, abrasive, and out there. I kept trying to imagine what they were thinking about us. Are we being stereotypical Americans? I tried to monitor my behaviors in different settings because I didn’t want to stand out and didn’t want to reinforce those stereotypes.

While being away from America, the participants realized the privilege of being an American. Katie expressed her gratitude of being an American:

It made me not take [being an American] for granted and being grateful for what we have in the United States. They [South Africans] don't have the resources we do and don't get the help that they need, like government assistance. We should be grateful and remember how lucky we really are.

Beth also expressed her appreciation for the American government support and protection, saying,

We're blessed in America. I am glad that I was born and raised here [in America]. We are a very protected country. I may not have agreed before the trip . . . but I am more grateful [because] I know if I have kids and lose my job, I have a government system that will help and support me until I can get back onto my feet.

SOCIOPOLITICAL AWARENESS

As the participants were exposed to various social settings, they became sensitive and aware of sociopolitical issues, such as poverty, lack of educational resources, weak social infrastructure, employment inequality, and racial segregation. This self-awareness triggered various strong emotional reactions among participants. Beth said, "I definitely expected it, but not to that extent. I have never seen so many people without running water." Jenny also commented on her lack of awareness about the poverty level in South Africa, saying, "I was blown away by what I saw—the living conditions, the lack of things, looking at the cisterns holding the rainwater. It was just 'wow'. I wasn't expecting to see that." Jenny also pointed out the disparity of wealth, saying, "It was difficult to see such beautiful homes and people with so much money beside people with nothing and people who were dying of diseases which can easily be cured, like cholera. That was difficult to watch."

All of the participants saw the physical division and architectural barriers; they experienced uneasiness and felt a lack of safety and security. Katie recalled the memory of her first night in Johannesburg, saying, "They had really tall, metal, pointy fences. They don't like you to go out after dark, especially alone. You couldn't leave the property after dark. . . . This made me curious what's actually going on [in] this country."

Because all of the participants self-identified their racial ethnic background as White Americans, they struggled with the notion of race (i.e., being "White" or being "Black") in South Africa. Jeffery's understanding of "power," "privilege," "the majority," and "being a White person" and how he had viewed them as synonyms were challenged for the first time in his life:

Race, I mean that's something I'll probably struggle with my whole life. Here [in America], I am the majority, and then when you go somewhere else you could be a minority. That's something that I definitely pay attention to. It's a totally different feeling.

ENGAGEMENT WITH SOUTH AFRICANS AND THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Having direct encounters with local communities, which included listening to life stories, stimulated and challenged participants' worldviews. Beth

expressed what she learned through conversations with South Africans about racial segregation:

The country is very segregated. I know it was, but I didn't understand the extent until you actually go talk to people. It wasn't until the 2nd week, we sat down and actually talked to a waitress, [she] totally explained to us how segregated it was . . . we had heard it from different people, but for some reason the way she put it, really put it in perspective.

A separate unexpected incident led some participants to another genuine interaction. Beth recalled when her vehicle broke down and she was forced to stay behind waiting for another van to come:

We actually got to have a lot of interactions with people at Krueger Park. Actually got to sit down and talk to them about life, living in South Africa. That was probably my longest interaction with anybody [from South Africa].

Meeting with South African college students and professors provided perspectives about education, culture, and life in South Africa, as well as how Americans are perceived by South Africans. Anna stated,

We got to meet some students. They were fascinated with what we knew, and their perception on America was fascinating. It was funny too because we were in shorts and t-shirts and they had boots, scarves, and hats. There was a difference in the way we dressed. I also found out from them that they need to do a lot more writing for exams. That was interesting.

Participants expressed that direct contact with South Africans was different than learning about a culture from textbooks, articles, or videos. Katie emphasized the importance of having these genuine interactions as a key element of the immersion experience: "I had the opportunity to go, but didn't just want to see the sights. I wanted to get involved in the culture and meet with people too. I think that was an important aspect of this trip."

APPRECIATION OF LIFE

Despite poverty and external barriers that could leave one feeling hopeless, participants were reminded of the essence of humanity. Jenny described the moment she was inspired by the dedication and compassion of teachers she encountered:

It was so inspiring to see people's hearts who wanted to create a safe place for the children. Even though it was just a room and there were mats on the floor, they wanted a safe place for the children away from rape, violence, or drugs.

Another participant, Anna, shared her insights about happiness:

Having been to Africa and seeing people with nothing—no running water, no electricity, no access to health care—that are so happy and content really helped us to understand how little we need to be happy and content, how little we need in order to help others and show love to others.

Participants also discussed the changes in their attitudes with regard to becoming more grateful and open to diversity and life itself after the cross-cultural immersion experience. Jeffrey mentioned that he gained a sense of appreciation toward diversity after the trip, saying, "It makes you appreciate the diversity. [Culture] is not black and white; it's a whole rainbow." The interactions that Katie had with South Africans changed the way she felt about life. She stated, "They [South Africans] were just appreciative. It really makes you thankful for what you have here [in America] and what you take for granted."

Overall, the participants exhibited a greater sense of understanding toward culture, people, and life. Jenny had a realization about the purpose of her life, saying, "Every time I leave, I gain a better understanding about the purpose of life; it's not about the stuff you have, it's just about the people. It's about caring for people and loving people." Katie expressed how the immersion experience changed her life, saying, "I think it changed so many things; it definitely made me a better person." Anna also mentioned her desire to "live more and do more because I have the opportunity to do so."

COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

Readjustment to life in the United States was another important aspect of the cross-cultural immersion experience. Beth expressed her feelings of guilt about enjoying abundant resources she took for granted, such as

... being able to come home and curl up on my bed with my puppy and turn on the TV, being able to open the refrigerator and eat what I wanted to eat, and being able to go and buy 100 dollars' worth of groceries and knowing that many South Africans couldn't afford what would be a dollar for a loaf of bread.

Participants also mentioned that they became more conscious of their behaviors. For example, paying closer attention to what they were buying and trying not to depend on technology in their daily lives had an impact on their way of living in the United States. Katie expressed, "I tried to cut back on the frivolous buying. I tried to minimize what I needed. You start to think, 'I don't need that' or 'that's just a frivolous luxury I don't need.'"

Moreover, participants stressed enhanced listening skills, empathy, and openness. Jenny said,

My listening skills have definitely improved. I really try and listen to what people say and really listen for the point that they are trying to get across, not just take it at face value ... really get down to the deeper issue of what might be bothering them.

Katie shared her increased ability to empathize with others after the immersion trip:

I learned more about empathy though this experience. Coming into the counseling program, they talk about empathy ... that you really want to meet the person where they are. Going on this trip, it really helped with that aspect, and I think it will continue to help. Everyone is fighting a different battle and going through something different, which was really eye opening.

Openness to individuals and other cultures was found among the participants. Jenny said,

I want to be open and make my clients from diverse cultures feel comfortable. If they were to ever come into my office, they will know it is a safe place for them. I don't want them to feel that they couldn't talk about their issues or culture. I want them to be open about that.

Jeffrey expressed his openness and desire to explore more immersion opportunities, saying,

This trip is kind of the impetus to get me to do it more. I have the travel bug. It really makes me want to visit other places and just see different cultures and how people live. I am interested in the world around me more than I was before. I would love to continue traveling.

Enhancement of self-awareness and self-reflection appeared to lead behavior changes and commitment to social advocacy among the participants. After the immersion experience in South Africa, participants started to get involved in various social activities in their communities, including helping the homeless, writing to soldiers, and making donations to domestic violence shelters. Beth stated,

I guess it helped me step up with a lot of the organizations. Being a Soldier's Angel, writing to soldiers and sending packages, and helping with the homeless. I guess I feel that I should give back to the community.

discussion and recommendations

This study explored the process of a short-term, cross-cultural immersion experience for graduate-level counseling students in South Africa. The themes that emerged from the interviews characterized the participants' increased awareness and reflectivity about their own culture and cultural identity, as well as various sociopolitical issues. The themes also portray how much cultural knowledge was gained through engaging with communities. Study results indicated that the immersion experience provided participants with invaluable opportunities to examine the core values in humanity and become appreciative about what they have and who they are. The changed attitudes and perspectives about themselves and the world were expressed through their interactions with others by active listening, empathizing, demonstrating openness, and engaging with social actions and community activities. After the immersion experience, participants expressed their desire to learn more about other cultures and to integrate their cross-cultural attitudes, skills, and behaviors into a new outlook on life and their counseling work.

The findings of the current study were consistent with previous studies (Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009; Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009; Ishii et al., 2009; West-Olatunji et al., 2011) that underlined a process encompassing

various cognitive and emotional processes in multicultural learning. Various emotional and cognitive responses, such as excitement, openness, connection, awareness, understanding, appreciation, and integration, played a significant role in multicultural learning. Moreover, resisting emotional and cognitive responses, such as confusion, apprehensive, frustration, and anxiety, served important roles in the development of critical consciousness and transformation learning (West-Olatunji et al., 2011). Counselor educators may need to appropriately intervene when students experience those emotional and cognitive responses. Therefore, it would be beneficial for counselor educators to know the unique characteristics of the cross-cultural learning process (i.e., direct contacts with people from different cultures, engagement in social actions and community activities, various emotional and cognitive responses to a new culture) and intervene to maximize students' multicultural learning.

The findings also suggest that the richness and complexity of the cross-cultural immersion process through interactions with external factors (e.g., direct contacts with local communities, surroundings, and nature) and internal factors (e.g., self-reflection on one's thoughts, emotions, and characteristics) enhance critical consciousness in multicultural development. Both direct encounters with community members (e.g., restaurant servers, shop clerks, international travelers, college students, professors, newspaper reporters, children, parents, families) and structured programs (e.g., involving charity activities and visiting historical museums and sites, natural parks, schools, universities, and theaters) appeared to stimulate students' cognitive and emotional responses and inspire meaningful social engagements. Consistent with previous studies (Alvarez, 2001; Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009; Freire, 2000; Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009; West-Olatunji et al., 2011), the cultural immersion experience surpasses traditional approaches in multicultural counseling in a way that provides opportunities for students to be exposed not only to cultural traditions, food, and holidays, but also to a deeper understanding of culture and cultural groups in their sociopolitical contexts. It also facilitates critical consciousness, in which the students examine, question, and expand their cultural knowledge and assumptions, while engaging in community involvement to advocate for social justice.

We hope that this qualitative study will open the door for further exploration of the role and effectiveness of experiential learning and cross-cultural immersion experiences in counselor education curricula. However, a study limitation is that we examined only the perceptions of participants' narratives. Using quantitative research methods to validate the development of critical consciousness through a cross-cultural immersion experience could be beneficial to understand the contributing factors. For example, it would be valuable to measure to what extent a cross-cultural immersion experience enhances empathy, listening skills, political awareness, and self-awareness. Another limitation is the lack of racial diversity among the participants. Because all of the participants self-identified their racial ethnic background as White Americans, it is reasonable to speculate that a heterogeneous group

would have different reactions to and experiences with the cross-cultural immersion experience.

Moreover, data were collected via postmeasurement (i.e., 6 months after the immersion experience). The decision was made, in part, because of the convenience of data collection. However, we also believed that the participants needed time to reflect, process, and organize their experiences. Furthermore, the interviews were solely based on the participants' recollections about their cross-cultural experiences. Narratives may have been affected by possible memory issues and/or personal/professional experiences after cross-cultural immersion learning. It would be beneficial to access data at different time points during the cross-cultural immersion experience.

Even though experiential learning can enhance student multicultural learning, participation in a cross-cultural immersion program can be costly and time-consuming for students and faculty. It may be beneficial for counselor educators to coordinate viable and affordable cross-cultural immersion opportunities, such as a community involvement with a local subcultural group for an extended period of time. This way, students may experience cross-cultural immersion learning without going abroad.

A programming recommendation for counselor educators is to implement a multimethod approach (e.g., traditional didactic courses; group discussions; cross-cultural immersion trips; community service activities; other hands-on, cross-cultural experiences) to help students both (a) learn about concepts and theories regarding multicultural counseling and competency inside of classrooms, and (b) undertake experiential learning opportunities so that students can maximize the learning outcomes of multicultural learning.

conclusion

The findings of this pilot study illustrate the educational impact of a cross-cultural immersion experience among master's-level students in counselor education. Engaging in a new environment and discovering unknown characteristics and strengths of oneself appear to challenge and facilitate students to examine their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and have opportunities to reconstruct their sociocultural identities in a new way. Moreover, changes in self-awareness and multicultural sensitivity appear to be transferred to actions that include being more engaged in community services, culturally sensitive to their clients in practice, critically conscious in spending, and open to learning and experiencing other cultures. Incorporating both didactic and experiential learning modalities as well as considering critical factors (i.e., direct contact with people from different cultures, engagement in social actions and community activities, self-reflection, and self-

awareness) when designing and implementing experiential learning may enable students to maximize the development of critical consciousness and multicultural competence.

references

- Alvarez, A. (2001). Enhancing praxis through PRACIS critical consciousness and implications for strategy. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 21*, 195–220. doi:10.1300/J067v21n01_12
- American Counseling Association. (2014). *ACA code of ethics*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Arthur, N., & Achenbach, K. (2002). Counselor preparation: Developing multicultural counseling competencies through experiential learning. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 42*, 1–14. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2002.tb01299.x
- Berdan, S., Goodman, A., & Taylor, S. (2013). *A student guide to study abroad*. New York, NY: Institute of International Education.
- Burnett, J. A., Hamel, D., & Long, L. L. (2004). Service learning in graduate counselor education: Developing multicultural counseling competency. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 32*, 180–191. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2004.tb00370.x
- Canfield, B. S., Low, L., & Hovestadt, A. (2009). Cultural immersion as a learning method for expanding intercultural competencies. *Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 17*, 318–322.
- Cordero, A., & Rodriguez, L. (2009). Fostering cross-cultural learning and advocacy for social justice through an immersion experience in Puerto Rico. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 29*, 134–152. doi:10.1080/08841230802238195
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2009). *2009 standards*. Retrieved from <http://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2009-Standards.pdf>
- Crampton, P., Dowell, A., Parkin, C., & Thompson, C. (2003). Combating effects of racism through a cultural immersion medical education program. *Academic Medicine, 78*, 595–598.
- DeRizzo, J. N., & Sciarra, D. T. (2005). The immersion experience in multicultural counselor training: Confronting covert racism. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 33*, 2–16. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2005.tb00001.x
- Diaz-Lazaro, C. M., & Cohen, B. B. (2001). Cross-cultural contact in counseling training. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 29*, 41–57. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2001.tb00502.x
- Ellenwood, A., & Snyders, R. (2006). Inside-out approaches to teaching multicultural techniques. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy, 17*, 67–81. doi:10.1300/J085v17n01_05
- Fawcett, M. F., Briggs, C. A., Maycock, G., & Stine, E. (2010). Multicultural counseling competency development: Pre-post design with Guatemala travel study students. *Journal of International Counselor Education, 2*, 1–18.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York, NY: The Seabury Press.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Goodman, R. D., & West-Olatunji, C. A. (2009). Applying critical consciousness: Culturally competent disaster response outcomes. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 87*, 458–465. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2009.tb00130.x

- Holcomb-McCoy, C., & Myers, J. E. (1999). Multicultural competence and counselor training: A national survey. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 77*, 294–302. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6676.1999.tb02452.x
- Institute of International Education. (2013). *Open Doors report on international educational exchange*. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>
- Ishii, H., Gilbride, D. D., & Stensrud, R. (2009). Students' internal reactions to a one-week cultural immersion trip: A qualitative analysis of student journals. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 37*, 15–27. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2009.tb00088.x
- Kim, B. S. K., & Lyons, H. Z. (2003). Experiential activities and multicultural counseling competence training. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 81*, 400–408. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2003.tb00266.x
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nakanishi, M., & Rittner, B. (1992). The inclusionary cultural model. *Journal of Social Work Education, 28*, 27–35. doi:10.1080/10437797.1992.10778755
- Paige, R. M., Fry, G. W., Stallman, E., Jon, J., & Josic, J. (2009). Study abroad for global engagement: The long-term impact of mobility experiences. *Intercultural Education, 20*, 29–44.
- Pedersen, P. (1988). *Handbook for developing multicultural awareness*. Washington, DC: American Association for Counseling and Development.
- Pedersen, P. B. (1991). Multiculturalism as a generic approach to counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 70*, 6–12. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6676.1991.tb01555.x
- Plante, T. G., Lackey, K., & Hwang, J. (2009). The impact of immersion trips on development of compassion among college students. *Journal of Experiential Education, 32*, 28–43. doi:0.1177/105382590903200104
- Ponterotto, J. G. (1997). Multicultural counseling training: A competency model and national survey. In D. B. Pope-Davis & H. L. K. Coleman (Eds.), *Multicultural counseling competencies: Assessment, education and training, and supervision* (pp. 111–130). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pope-Davis, D. B., Breaux, C., & Liu, W. M. (1997). A multicultural immersion experience: Filling a void in multicultural training. In D. B. Pope-Davis & H. L. K. Coleman (Eds.), *Multicultural counseling competencies: Assessment, education and training, and supervision* (pp. 227–241). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- QSR International. (2012). NVivo 10 [Computer software]. Available from <http://www.qsrinternational.com>
- Ridley, C. R., Mendoza, D. W., & Kanitz, B. E. (1994). Multicultural training: Reexamination, operationalization, and integration. *The Counseling Psychologist, 22*, 227–289. doi:10.1177/0011000094222001
- Sheperis, C. J., Young, J. S., & Daniels, M. H. (2010). *Counseling research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Sodowsky, G. R., Taffe, R. C., Gutkin, T. B., & Wise, S. L. (1994). Development of the Multicultural Counseling Inventory: A self-report measure of multicultural competencies. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 41*, 137–148. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.41.2.137
- Tomlinson-Clarke, S. M., & Clarke, D. (2010). Culturally focused community-centered service learning: An international cultural immersion experience. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 38*, 166–175. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2010.tb00124.x

- Wertz, F. J. (2005). Phenomenological research methods for counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 167–177. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.167
- West-Olatunji, C., Goodman, R. D., Mehta, S., & Templeton, L. (2011). Creating cultural competence: An outreach immersion experience in southern Africa. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 33*, 335–346. doi:10.1007/s10447-011-9138-0