Is This What Counselors Are? Conflict Stories in Multicultural Coursework

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Abstract

Classroom-based conversations about multicultural issues can be difficult, ranging with various degrees of tension that span between affective stress to full on turbulent emotional exchanges. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to better understand the student perspective of conflict in the classroom. Understanding conflict stories are imperative for the training of professional counselors bound to both cultural competency and professional growth. Findings reveal both content and structure of students' conflict stories in multicultural counseling classes as they navigate the tasks of professional identity development. Themes of gatekeeping and collective accountability emerged, in addition to transformation and meaning-making.

Keywords

Becoming a counselor in a training program accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) means that one must develop an awareness of social and cultural diversity by "identifying and eliminating barriers, prejudices, and processes of intentional and unintentional oppression" (CACREP, 2016, p. 9). These goals were also outlined and endorsed with the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) in 2016 (Ratts et al.,2016). The developmental sequence of MSJCC begins with an internal examination of self-awareness as a prerequisite for action. These standards encourage students to challenge themselves, confront their biases, and develop an appreciation of dialogue that gets to the core of multicultural issues. Teaching counselor trainees to attend to these personal and powerful issues relating to social identities, racism, inequity, and oppression requires rendering explicit what is often kept silent.

With the emphasis on personal growth and self-reflexivity outlined in most counselor education curricula, students in multicultural counseling classes are typically asked to examine personal biases, prejudices, and confront stereotypes (Buckley & Foldy, 2010; Pieterse et al., 2009; Reynolds, 2011; Sue et al., 2010; Yoon et al., 2014). For counselors-in-training, classroom-based conversations about these issues can be difficult. Student responses include various degrees of tension that span from affective stress (Buckley & Foldy, 2010) to full-on turbulent emotional exchanges (Burton & Furr, 2014; Sue et al., 2009b; Sue et al., 2010). Morisette and Gadbois' (2006) review of counseling pedagogy highlighted the minimal research that explores the degree of both conflict in the classroom alongside the requirements of personal exploration. This research indicated that while conflicts are present, there exists a limited understanding of how students experience them.

The experiences of faculty are well-documented. Many studies focus on the experience (Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Milan & Bridges, 2019), perception (Burton & Furr, 2014), and skill of those who teach multicultural counseling courses (Fier & Ramsey, 2005; Sue et al., 2009a). Burton and Furr (2014) examined the relationship between perceived sense of multicultural classroom conflict and the use of conflict management techniques used by instructors. This study found that when conflictual dialogue arose, the most effective strategies were those that addressed the relationship between faculty and students. Sue et al. (2009a) explored the faculty perspective of difficult dialogues on race. The results revealed that significant obstacles exist in facilitating conflict, including fear of showing personal bias and an inability to recognize the dynamics of classroom conflict (Sue et al., 2009a). Such research also found that in instances of conflict in the classroom, faculty members appear to be ill-equipped to facilitate conflict as it occurs in the multicultural classroom. Milan and Bridges (2019) revealed both the scope and sources of difficulty in the multicultural classroom. These researchers illuminated the perspectives of counselor educators, namely that although multicultural counseling may be more challenging to teach, it offers more potential reward.

The findings of these studies are consistent with Reynolds' (2011) exploratory study on the perceptions and experiences of faculty who teach multicultural counseling courses. The findings of these surveys revealed that faculty perceived negative student reactions as (a) intergroup tension and conflict, (b) clashes with personal values, and (c) feeling threatened or challenged by content. Until now, the primary viewpoint assessed in research about conflict in multicultural classes has been from the faculty's perspective. While such research is valuable and important, it is only a single vantage point.

The field of higher education has focused some attention on the experiences of students learning about cultural and social issues. In these settings, researchers have found that learners experience conflict (Martin, 2010; Tije, 2002), shame, anger, and guilt (Zembylas, 2008) when learning about multicultural issues. Educational researchers have also found that students experience emotional dysregulation (Ayoko & Konrad, 2012), and value challenges (Gloria et al., 2000) when confronting issues of race and diversity. Though compelling, this research does not account for the uniquely specific experience of students in graduate programs, where multicultural competence is both an ethical requirement and a facet of professional identity. A deeper understanding of how these conflicts are experienced alongside professional identity development may be invaluable for counselor educators and program coordinators.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is a theoretical approach to change-based learning. Grounded in epistemic assumptions that influence meaning such as early behaviorism, constructivism, feminism, and systems theories, transformative learning assumes that learners face challenges that require critical reflection (Mezirow & Taylor, 2010). The influences on Mezirow's (1978) early writings on transformative learning are found in Freire's (1970) *conscientization*, Kuhn's (1962) *paradigm*, and Habermas' (1971, 1984) *domains of learning* (Kitchenham, 2008). Mezirow first affixed the concept of *transformation* to research exploring women returning to education after an extended time away (1978). Mezirow (1978) suggested that transformative learning requires an understanding of "how we are caught in our own history" (p. 101). To transform in learning, Mezirow advocated that cultural and psychological assumptions that construct our ways of understanding the world must be brought into focus (Mezirow, 1978). Reflection is an essential component of this process and is present at phases three (assessment of assumptions) and four

(recognition) of Mezirow's ten-phase progression of transformational learning. Once a learner experiences a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 7), it sets the reflective process in motion.

Conflict experiences have many characteristics in common with transformative learning. Transformational learning and conflict share the qualities of (a) perceived lack of control, (b) unexpectedness (c) creating lasting problems, and (d) leaving conflicting parties blaming themselves. Also cited are feelings of guilt, anger, fear, and anxiety. In a qualitative study on personal growth, transformation, and interpersonal conflict, Rowe (2002) argued that conflict experiences violate the same structures of meaning as a transformational event. The results of this study uphold the relationship between conflict and transformational learning, further supporting Mezirow's (2006) argument that conflict and the rebuilding of meaning structures represent transformative change.

In transformational learning, rumination and meaning-making is an outcome of experiencing a stressful event and is assumed to play a vital role in the development of personal growth. Reflection is a necessary component of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991). This is relevant to the present study that attempts to hear how counseling students have ruminated and reflected on their own classroom conflict experiences. Understanding how students are reflecting on conflicts will help in framing and developing methods hand down learning experiences that result in meaningful transformations.

Research Question

To better understand the characteristics, experiences, and meanings that students ascribe to multicultural classroom conflict, I formed one central research question: How do counseling students experience, understand, and reflect upon conflict that occurs in a multicultural counseling

course? The major components of this question are "how," "understand," "experience," and "reflect." The open nature of the word "how" facilitates openness to any responses participants share related to the notion of conflict. The word "experience" underscores an emphasis on comprehensive conflict stories. Lastly, the words "understand" and "reflect" implies that participant responses represent their subjective relativity and that stories told will be reflective. An additional research question (What impact do these experiences of conflict have on students?) will examine how students are impacted by the conflicts they experience, aiming to explore meanings and transformations in light of conflict experiences.

Methods

Researcher Lens

The primary researcher for this study is a counselor educator with a committed attention toward multicultural issues. She has taken a multitude of courses and workshops that emphasize cultural competence and difficult dialogues specifically. One consistent observation made in multicultural coursework was the tension felt among participants in a course when a sensitive topic came up. She has experienced conflict, and personally engaged in difficult dialogues with others. She has been exposed to various cultural collisions in both her personal and professional life that resulted in the capacity for developing new meanings and schemas. To attenuate her own presuppositions and minimize the impact of her own experiences, she informally reviewed her analysis and reflective memoing with trusted researchers and colleagues within and outside of counselor education.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry examines recollected experiences. While much of qualitative research focuses on the content of experiences collected, this approach views stories as both the method

and the phenomenon of study. The epistemic interest of narrative analysis is to gain descriptions of particular experiences through both their content and structure. Narrative inquiries often present findings as rich descriptions that reveal structures and meanings of experiences. Bruner (1990) described narrativizing as a function that allows people to recall chaotic experiences in casual settings to reflect and make sense of them. In the present study, the function of storytelling creates a pathway to convey the meanings of both conflict and transformation (Bruner, 1990; 1991). Stories are useful to both participants and researchers because they are tools that individuals commonly use to express, understand, and communicate experiences.

Research that focuses on the role and function of narratives involves life story research, oral histories, or recounting experiences (Glense, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1988). Riessman (1993) argued that it is the mechanism of storytelling that becomes the object of investigation-not necessarily the stories in and of themselves. In this narrative inquiry, both the content and reflection of conflict were of interest. This method is well suited to investigating the experiences of conflict in a multicultural class because the recollection of a story may reveal structures of transformative learning. For this study, stories of conflict in multicultural counseling classes were collected and analyzed for both content and structure. I utilized a design that collects and analyzes narratives to reveal their content and structural meanings.

Recruitment

I utilized a purposive criterion sampling procedure to gain participants for this study who shared a specific experience (Patton, 2002). Inclusion criteria resulted in participants who identified as having experienced a conflict in their multicultural course. Based on the research of Sue et al. (2009b), these conflicts were be limited to those that were cognitive, behavioral, or emotional. Inclusion criteria were limited to full-time students currently enrolled in a CACREP-

accredited master's program in counseling, who have completed an on-ground multicultural counseling. This approach ensured a homogenous sample.

Recruitment strategies included utilizing networks that connect CACREP-accredited master's programs such as mailing lists. I used both phone calls and video-based messaging to explain the nature and purpose of the study, review and sign consent forms via e-mail, and schedule initial interviews. Eight participants were contacted after inclusion screening and selected seven to participate in the study. The study was approved by a peer-reviewed institutional review board and adhered to ethical research standards (ACA, 2014).

Narrative analysis is well-suited to small sample sizes (Riessman, 2003) as it seeks in depth-descriptions of stories rather than breadth of experiences. All participants attended on-ground CACREP-accredited master's programs across various regions in the United States. Of the seven participants, six identified as female, one identified as non-binary. Five identified as White, one identified as Latina, and one identified as Biracial. Ages ranged from 22-28. In reporting the data, preferred pronouns were utilized in addition to self-selected pseudonyms.

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews with video-based messaging software. One interview was conducted in-person. All interviews were audio and video recorded. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. For each participant, the interview protocol starting with broad, open-ended questions that become more specific and tailored to the individual features and content of stories, resulting in detailed and unique narratives of conflict. As each story unfolded, I utilized probing questions and more specific prompts. This method allows each interview to change and shift and depending on the participant's detail.

Storytelling can often incorporate artifacts to enhance or provide descriptive components. As such, I informed participants of the option to bring artifacts to their interviews that might enhance or bolster their storytelling. Two participants elected to contribute reflective writing and final papers to enhance their storytelling. These additional documents were collected after interviews had concluded, and were included in the analysis to triangulate the primary interview data.

Trustworthiness

I followed established standards for trustworthy qualitative research (Hunt, 2011). Transparency was emphasized in explaining the procedures and methodologies of the study to the participants throughout. I utilized the specific mechanisms of data triangulation, bridling, member-checking, and recommendations for establishing qualitative validity proposed by both Yardley (2017) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) to build credibility and trustworthiness. *Bridling* is a qualitative research term used by Dahlberg (2006) to describe a process that qualitative researchers engage with to address their assumptions throughout the research process. Dalberg's (2006) bridling breaks away from the use of bracketing, a common technique used in phenomenological research. Despite its common use in phenomenological approaches, the method is well suited to the reflexive process of narrative inquiry. Bridling sets out to accomplish two things: (a) it aims to enact the initial process of bracketing in that pre-understandings and assumptions are restrained so they do not limit the "researching openness" (Vagle et al., 2009); (b) it works as an active process in which the researcher continually tends to the understanding of the phenomena of interest as a whole throughout the study. I engaged in both written reflective memoing as well as audio-recorded oral memos to monitor thoughts and feelings throughout the research process.

Member checking enhanced the rigor and accuracy of data analysis. This provided participants with opportunities to correct, edit, challenge, or enhance the interpretations that emerged throughout each phase of analysis. One participant clarified two points regarding her tenor and diction. Throughout member checking, we aimed to reach consensus. Consensus building became integral in honing in on the accuracy and descriptions of the stories provided (Creswell et al., 2007).

Analysis

I developed transcripts from both audio and video-recorded interviews. Such transcripts included both verbal and non-verbal content such as silence, sighs, utterances, pregnant pauses, and moments of stuck-ness in storytelling. For example, when participants articulated or demonstrated difficulty in articulating a component of the story, (e.g., "finding the right word") this was noted in both phases of analysis. Atlas.ti 8 (2013), a qualitative software package, was only utilized for data management and organization.

The analytic procedures in this study utilized multiple steps within a larger multi-phase approach. First, the analysis followed five steps of the Sort and Sift, Think and Shift approach, including inventorying the data, memoing, categorizing, and bridging (Maietta, 2006). Categorizing and bridging data was broken into three primary narrative analytic stages: (a) transcribing individual transcripts; (b) conducting a vertical thematic analysis for each narrative; and (c) conducting a horizontal analysis across narratives (Feldman et al, 2004; Riessman, 1993).

During the initial vertical structural analysis, I divided, condensed and abstracted the text to form initial topics to review. Once established, I revisited the original text alongside the naïve understanding that was developed (Fagerberg & Norberg, 2009). This allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the narrative as an interpreted whole (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

The horizontal analysis provided generative thematic insights across participant stories. This was done by comparing and contrasting stories between each transcript, and grouping what emerged across them based on thematic similarities. The analysis yielded a rich and textured understanding of the multicultural conflict stories of counseling students.

This approach combined an established procedure to qualitative analysis with the functionality of analysis software to immerse, step back, and capture both the content and structure participant responses. By analyzing the text both vertically and horizontally, rich topics both within-and-between each participant emerged. The work of interpretation here is essential; it involved concern with the stories embedded within each narrative, rather than an attempt to validate what each narrative claimed (Feldman et al. 2004).

Results

Conflict stories shared characteristics with transformative learning, such as feelings of guilt, anger, fear, and anxiety. This study's results confirmed the linkage between conflict and transformational learning, supporting Mezirow's (2006) argument that conflict and the subsequent rebuilding of meaning structures represent transformative change. The transformational tasks outlined by Mezirow (2006) also aligned with how participants' ruminated on conflict in their multicultural coursework. One unexpected finding revealed that conflict was expressed in terms of professional identity development.

Transformational learning has been applied to counselor education in several ways. Dollarhide et al. (2010) developed a preliminary developmental theory of the counselor's professional identity transformation. These researchers deconstructed counselor identity development along three main transformational themes: (1) defining counseling; (2) responsibility for professional growth; and (3) transformation to identity. The first task, defining counseling,

outlined how students were understanding and describing the profession of counseling. The second task, responsibility for professional growth, outlined how students were framing whom or what is responsible for their development as a counselor. The final developmental task, transformation to identity, outlined how students perceived their professional identities in relation to the larger professional communities (Dollarhide et al., 2010). This narrative analysis also revealed that the tasks professional counselor identity development and cultural competence were often at the core of both why conflict occurred and how students processed it.

Two main categories arrived in the final stage of analysis. The first category, related to answer Research Question 1 and named for its in-vivo code, "is this what counselors are?" included three subcategories (i.e., expectations for each other, gatekeeping, and professional development). The second category—transformations--is related to Research Question 2 and describes how students reflect and make meaning out of conflict experienced in the multicultural course. This category represented two groups of responses in terms of what meanings existed in light of conflict experiences. Three participants reported positive meanings and transformations, while three indicated negative meanings. This division among meaning-making in conflict underscores the importance of facilitating conflict in a meaningful way.

Is this what counselors are?

Participants seemed to indicate that conflict typically ensued when their peers or professors in class acted in ways that were incongruent to their professional expectations. It is evident that a students' emerging professional identity may influence their expectations and experiences of conflict. This category composed of three subcategories.

Expectations

In each conflict story, participants expressed that they anticipated tension, challenge, difficulty, or conflict in their multicultural counseling course. Many framed this expectation within the realm of training and curriculum. In describing how she expected herself and her classmates to enter the course, Elena expressed that she anticipated conflict. She said, "we're all making the agreement to be open to conflict, to be open to having a dialogue." Alyssa also articulated her anticipation for the course: "The point of the class [was] to have this type of confrontation…It was set up in a way where we were supposed to have these discussions." Lisa also expected conflict: "being in graduate school where we're all making the agreement to learn, to be open to conflict to be open to have a dialogue." Jennifer specifically framed her expectations of the instructor, "professors should be taking opportunities to restructure negative beliefs that people have and help to constructively challenge people…" In reflecting on her experiences of a conflictual multicultural course, Jennifer also expressed feeling "…a lot of disappointment in my counseling program." These examples emphasize the expectation that students have entering a course with significant affective demands.

Gatekeeping

Students' developing sense of obligation to protect the counseling professional from unethical and harmful behavior impacted how they experienced conflicts. All participants completed at least one semester of graduate school and were still enrolled in their programs during the time of the interview. Many participants framed their conflicts with hypothetical questions that spoke to both a growing sense of professional identity and specific concerns around gatekeeping. Alyssa recounted a conflict experienced in her course that detailed a peer speaking negatively about a minority population. She said, "how are you going to deal with that? Are you going to say something like that to your client?" Elena also asked a question in reflecting upon a similar kind

of conflict, "I was like, no…no. This can't be good. Is this what counselors are? Is this what they're all holding inside?" Rain had a similar question embedded in their story, "I get worried about this…how many of those do we have in our program? How many counselors like this graduated and are actually seeing clients?" These students' sense of professional identity development is emerging, but they all expressed a sense of ethical responsibility to each other and their future clients. A noteworthy linguistic observation across this subtheme exists in the use of collective language. Participants used "us/we/our" in retelling and reprocessing their conflict stories. This may suggest an emerging sense of collective professional identity.

Professional Identity Development

Participants described tension and conflict in moments when their peers in class acted incongruous to their professional expectations. Participants articulated professional reflexivity with their conflict stories by referencing an ethical or professional obligation. Each narrative indicated conflict incidents related to their sense of professional development. All but one participant described peers in their class speaking or behaving in ways that misrepresented "what it means to be a counselor." Several narratives described fear, worry, or shame that a peer was shirking the work of professional development—specifically that of multicultural competence. Couching their conflicts within a professional context might be one unique attribute to conflicts experienced in counseling programs than general multicultural education.

Transformations

Transformation and meaning-making emerged as a code at the onset of vertical analysis to assess for moments of change, turning points or shifted thinking as a result of conflict. This theme attempts to address Research Question 2: What impact do these experiences of conflict have on students? While most of the participants described feeling different after their conflict experience,

how they articulated this difference varied. Some reported feeling stronger, more resilient, and having a stronger sense of professional identity. Others felt a more profound understanding of different perspectives and identities.

Not all meanings derived were positive, however. For some, the disappointment in their multicultural counseling course experiences resulted in building protective faculties in an attempt at self-preservation. For these participants, conflict translated into unresolved frustration, skepticism, and disappointment in their profession and program. For example, Lisa described that her conflict experiences increased her cynism: "we'd all like to believe that counselors won't have any biases at all, I know better now."

For Alyssa, Lisa, Vanessa, and Rain, advocacy became a common thread in the meanings derived from their conflict experiences. Each of them felt a stronger desire to advocate better understanding and knowledge for counselors as a whole. Rain felt that the conflicts in their multicultural class inspired them to educate others about gender and sexual diversity issues. This was also consistent with Alyssa's narrative, who described a more profound desire to tell her story to educate others: "It [makes] me to want to educate people, I just want to put myself out there. Just so people can actually learn". Alyssa even realized during interviewing that her interest in participating in this study was an act of advocacy.

The results of this study upheld the intersection of conflict and transformational learning, further supporting Mezirow's (2000) argument that conflict and the rebuilding of meaning structures represent transformative change. For example, Alyssa said, "It kind of solidified my beliefs. Solidified who I was. I am glad that I had the experience. Honestly". For Alyssa, Lisa, Rain, and Vanessa, conflict experiences transformed into generating a stronger sense of self, consistent with the findings of Rowe (2002) and Mezirow (2000).

Discussion and Implications

These findings illuminate the complex intersection between difficult multicultural dialogues and professional counselor identity development. If counselor education faculty and scholars can facilitate these conflicts in ways that result in transformational learning outcomes, they may be able to create learning environments that are more conducive to the development of multicultural competencies and professional identity. Being aware of the intersecting tasks of multicultural counselor education and professional identity development is particularly crucial for counselor educators to consider. Counselor educators often frame learning objectives as pathways to professional development. For example, multicultural competence is outlined by both the American Counseling Association (ACA) and CACREP as foundational to ethical and competent treatment. The adage, "know thy self" is frequently used to understand how to become a competent counselor and is therefore tethered to a sense of professional identity.

Participants frequently expressed their conflict in terms of disappointment in others– specifically those deemed misrepresenting the counseling profession. In CACREP-accredited programs, counselors-in-training are exposed to lessons on professional identity early in their respective programs. When students behaved, spoke, or acted in ways that the participants felt were incongruent to this professional identity, conflict ensued. This became a familiar trend in each conflict story and may be particularly relevant to counselor educators who teach multicultural counseling courses. Many of the same participants who experienced conflicts due to professional misrepresentation also expressed institutional conflicts; that is, frustrations with their program, instructor or educational institution for mishandling (or even inciting) conflicts in the classroom. Counselor educators may find particularly valuable that experiences of conflict are exacerbated if they are not facilitated expertly by program leadership or conceptualized alongside professional

identity development. These findings are consistent with Burton and Furr (2014), who maintained that specific types of conflict interventions by faculty range from being effective to injurious. The results of this study also confirm and extend the findings of Milan and Bridges (2019) who identified that the turbulent exchanges experienced by counselor educators may foster a sense purpose and fulfillment when it was transformed into teachable moments.

Because the tasks of professional identity development intersected with the content of conflict stories, it may serve counselor educators who teach multicultural counseling courses to review the literature around facilitating conflict and difficult dialogues, attending workshops or learning sessions at conferences that explore strategies for facilitating and managing conflict that are specific to the field of counselor education.

Limitations

The limitations of this study included researcher bias and sample representation. The lengths of classroom time varied for each participant. The length of a course is an important consideration in the experience of conflict, as time together may impact rapport building and trust between students in a multicultural course. Diversity considerations also present potential limitations; findings of this study will only be transferable to similar participants. The majority of the participants were female-identifying and White-passing. The results of this study cannot fully illuminate the specific needs of students from minority backgrounds who may experience specifically different conflicts. Finally, although the use of guidelines attempted to mitigate the risk of researcher bias, presuppositions may still impact the research process.

Suggestions for Future Research

Findings demonstrate the diverse and distinct quality of stories among master's level students who experience conflict in their multicultural counseling class as they navigate the

concurrent tasks of professional identity development. Because so few studies account for the student perspective of conflict experiences in multicultural counseling, more research as a whole is needed to better understand these dynamics. Communications and educational research has made strides in understanding conflicts in the classroom that are culturally motivated, so counselor education researchers may find interdisciplinary scholarship valuable.

Because of this study's small sample, replication studies with different cultural representations might be useful in understanding more specificities of how cultural identity impacts conflicts experienced. Additional research for part-time and non-traditional students, students from minority backgrounds, international students, students taking online or hybrid-versions of multicultural counseling, as well as male-identifying students is needed. Studies such as these may either highlight the nuances of student perspectives and experiences of conflict or generate more patterns between all students who experience conflict.

This study reinforces the notion that counselor trainees might appreciate meaningful exchanges even if it comes with the risk of feeling vulnerable or uncomfortable at times. Counselor educators must begin examining the sometimes unavoidable and unpleasant experiences of conflict to facilitate them in ways that limit their potential harm and perhaps instigate transformation and meaning-making. By assuming this social responsibility, counselor educators can create inclusive and trustworthy spaces where conflict can safely exist, and students' experiences are validated and affirmed.

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