Cultural Competency

In recent years, there has been a push toward a culture of competence in the field of mental health, which has precipitated an increased focus upon multicultural training in related graduate programs as increased awareness of these issues has been linked to culturally competent practice (Tummala-Narra, Singer, Li, Esposito, & Ash, 2012). Furthermore, Tummala-Narra et al. (2012) suggested, “involvement in experiential activities may be more effective than didactic training on diversity, and for other clinicians, some combination of experiential and didactic training may provide most benefits” (p. 172).

Cultural Plunge Assignments

Cultural competence operationalized. Throughout the course of the semester, students from the marriage and family therapy master’s-level program at Abilene Christian University (ACU) completed cultural plunge assignments that provided them the opportunity to increase their cultural competence by experiential means. To understand the implications of these assignments, the concept of cultural competence must be operationalized so that the impact of the assignments upon student competence can be measured. In this regard, cultural competence is defined by Imel et al. (2011) to be “the therapist integrating the necessary awareness of his or her own and the client’s cultural values and attitudes, knowledge about diverse groups of people, and skills necessary to provide adequate services to culturally diverse clients” (p. 290).

Efficacy of the cultural plunges. Thus, the efficacy of the plunge assignments can be assessed by the ways in which the assignments increased student awareness to culturally sensitive issues, knowledge of a diverse assortment of cultures and worldviews, and practical integration (in the therapy room) of the awareness and knowledge gained from the experiential
tasks. In keeping with the movement toward a culture of competence in mental health training, the cultural plunge assignments challenged students to engage in a variety of tasks and unfamiliar contexts to increase awareness of and sensitivity to, cultural issues that may be raised in their work with clients. Specifically, the plunges addressed the cultural issues of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, spirituality/religion, social class, and disability. After completing the tasks, students were asked to reflect upon their experiences in writing, noting their reaction to the task, the ways in which each task impacted their interaction with others as the task was completed, and the therapeutic implications of their experience. Implicit in this reflective exercise was self-evaluation of “strengths, weaknesses, and learning goals” in relation to the various tasks (Hatcher, et al., 2013, p. 89). Hatcher et al. (2013) suggested that such a process is a necessary step toward cultural competency. Furthermore, students engaged with one another and with their professor in guided discussion after the completion of each plunge. In this way, students were provided a safe space in which to discuss their experiences of the plunge and to challenge one another. According to Tummala-Narra, Singer, Li, Esposito, and Ash (2012),

…a clinician’s personal exploration of his or her own and others’ racial and cultural backgrounds is an important aspect of both personal diversity orientation and to professional identity as a culturally competent practitioner. Clinicians who revisit and examine their own beliefs about their own and others’ worldviews routinely may be less likely to inappropriately impose their own beliefs in practice. (p. 171)

Thus, the space for reflection, both written and in discussion, provided to students was likely to have increased their theoretical and practical competence with multicultural issues.
Personal Reflection

I will now reflect upon my experiences during the completion of the cultural plunge assignments, with special attention paid to the ways in which the plunges impacted my awareness, knowledge, and skills-base in relation to multicultural issues in theory and practice.

Therapeutic Anecdote

To assess my degree of comfort with multicultural issues in the practice of therapy and my growth in this area, I will draw upon an experience that I had with a client at the beginning of the semester before I elaborate upon the plunges. At this time, before much didactic and before any experiential training had occurred in relation to cultural competence as part of the cultural diversity class, I began to see a gay male client for therapy. At the onset of therapy, my client was very open with me about his sexual orientation and was clear that he was not attending therapy for any reason related to his sexual orientation, but rather for anxiety and depression. As he related his presenting problem to me, I was curious as to how his sexual orientation impacted the problems with which he was presenting. The predominant social climate in which this client lived was politically and religiously conservative, meaning that those who hold such an orientation certainly hold the power and privilege in this context. As a person embedded in such a culture, my thought was that my client might have experienced marginalization and some degree of discrimination. Furthermore, I was interested to know my client’s thoughts about how my own sexual orientation might impact the therapeutic relationship and was eager to engage him in conversation about our differences in relation to sexual orientation. However, during our sessions, I found myself extremely uncomfortable with raising the issue of sexual orientation with my client. Although I was aware of the ways in which such a conversation might be helpful to the process of therapy, I was unsure how I might engage my client in such a discussion with
sensitivity and respect. Therefore, I did not initiate any such conversation with my client during the first several weeks of our therapeutic relationship.

Though this anecdote relates primarily to the cultural issue of sexual orientation, I believe it to be representative of my overall comfort with multicultural issues. I attribute my hesitance to engage my client in such a cultural discussion to my relatively low level of cultural competence at the time. As I had not yet engaged in the experiential and didactic training offered by the cultural diversity course at the time of the initial sessions with this client, I had not yet gained the level of competence that I would later acquire as I progressed through the course.

**Gender**

For the cultural plunge assignment related to gender, we were required to interview a professional of the opposite gender about their experiences of gender discrimination in their work place. For this assignment, I interviewed a female licensed professional counselor employed at my externship site. During our conversation, she provided me with information that revealed the institutionalized nature of male power and privilege within the work setting in which she is employed, and noted that only two women hold leadership positions at her workplace.

The interviewee’s discussion of gender bias in her occupational context revealed the relatively static nature of the movement toward gender equality. Indeed, McIntosh (2008) gave voice to the stagnant condition of gender equality even within the field of women’s studies by making known the varied and often contradictory positions taken by those who recognize the inequality present within many of our systems and even stated, “Moreover, those few who will acknowledge that male privilege systems have over-empowered them usually end up doubting that we could dismantle these privilege systems” (p. 240).
According to Vecchio (2008), if male (specifically White male) family therapists are to conduct themselves with respect and with cultural competence within the client systems they seek to help, they must be intentional about engaging in training with women and other less-privileged individuals. Furthermore, Vecchio (2008) suggested that, within these training experiences, it is essential for privileged male therapists to take a one-down position, engaging as a curious student of the experience of privilege in our culture. Vecchio’s (2008) ideas were, in most ways, reflected in the structure of this cultural plunge assignment. By interviewing a female professional, I took the posture of a curious inquirer who was interested in learning from her experiences of male power and privilege in our subculture. This assignment provided a model for future conversations such as these that may occur with my clients in session. The assignment also gave me experience in initiating such discussions, which increased my confidence in my ability to facilitate such conversations.

**Sexual Orientation**

For the cultural plunge assignment related to sexual orientation, students of the cultural diversity course were required to wear a rainbow pin that represented support for sexual minorities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals for a week’s time. Students were required to wear the pin at all times for the duration of the week. As I completed this task, I was not met with any overt hostility as a result of my wearing the pin. However, I was able to identify a way in which I conducted myself during this time that I was dissatisfied with. On one occasion, when a client of mine asked why I was wearing the pin and if I was gay, I laughed in response to the question as though it was a ridiculous notion that I could be gay. Such a response effectively communicated that being gay is a joke and that it is humorous to me to be identified with such a people group, a subtly demeaning response.
Indeed, Korobov (2004) posited:

…that most men mix forms of hegemonic complicity with noncomplicity, blending sexism with nonsexism, and mitigating their own homophobia through disclaimers, irony, and humor. In other words, in everyday talk, the most common and pervasive forms of homophobia and sexism are often indirect. They are visible at a subtle level of innuendo, irony, and presupposition and, as such, are often rhetorically insulated and difficult to challenge without looking puritanical, naive, or lacking in a sense of humor. (p. 179)

My own response to my client’s question reflected the humor and presupposition that Korobov (2004) argued are an indirect expression of homophobia. This was not an aspect of my functioning around the issue of sexual orientation that I was consciously aware of before I completed the plunge assignment. As a result, this cultural plunge assignment allowed me the opportunity for self-of-the-therapist growth and work in relation to my own perception of sexual orientation. Such an engagement with my own schemas and beliefs, according to Tummala-Narra, Singer, Li, Esposito, and Ash (2012), allows for greater cultural competency.

**Ethnicity**

For the cultural plunge assignment related to ethnicity, students were required to attend an event or gathering in which they were the sexual minority. For the purposes of this assignment, I participated in a church service attended primarily by African Americans. As I completed this plunge experience, some of my past negative experiences with African Americans were brought to my mind, along with the associated fear and trepidation that I experience in close proximity to African American people. I was also reminded of the rigid and stereotypical ways in which my culture in childhood and adolescence perceived ethnic minorities. Though I enjoyed my experience attending the church service, I did experience some
unease while fulfilling the requirements of the plunge, although I did not feel, on an emotional level, like an ethnic minority.

McGoldrick, Giordano, and Garcia-Preto (2005), suggested that, to do culturally competent work with ethnically diverse clients, it is appropriate to assume that clients of ethnic minority status are likely to have internalized the discrimination they may have received and that those who are privileged are likely to have internalized their own superiority. Perhaps it speaks to my own privilege and internalized superiority that I did not feel marginalized or like an ethnic minority during this plunge experience. This assignment also caused me to consider the ways in which I might, from a position of power, be perpetuating the internalization of discrimination for ethnic minorities in my personal and professional interactions.

**Spirituality and Religion**

For the cultural plunge assignment related to spirituality and religion, students of the cultural diversity class were required to attend a religious service of a faith to which they were not an adherent. For the purposes of this assignment, I attended a local Church of Latter-Day Saints, or the LDS church. As I completed this assignment, I learned some of the doctrines and general information about this faith tradition that I did not know previously. As a result, I was able to increase my awareness of and knowledge of a culture to which I do not belong.

**Social Class**

For the cultural plunge assignment related to social class, the task assigned to students was twofold. Firstly, students were required to live on a food stamp budget for one week. This amount was $46.62 for the entire week. Secondly, students were required to, from the time the assignment was given in class and for a week thereafter, use only the amount of toilet paper
available from the roll that was currently in use in their bathroom at home. These plunge tasks were intended to simulate poverty.

This assignment was another task that provided, on an experiential level, much information that will be useful toward my ability to better relate to clients from a lower social class than myself. Furthermore, this plunge made the reality of the myth of meritocracy, that people from every social class have equal opportunity to be upwardly mobile, within our culture all the more apparent (Laszloffy, 2008). Thus, my sensitivity to the cultural inequalities that plague the economic structure of our society was increased.

**Disability**

For the cultural plunge assignment related to disability, students were required to be blindfolded in a public place for one hour. To complete this assignment, I went to a local restaurant, on a very busy night. During this plunge experience, I felt very vulnerable and powerless as I completed the assigned task. Ultimately, this experience increased my level of sensitivity to this cultural issue as well.

**Therapeutic Anecdote Revisited**

I will now revisit my experience with my client who challenged my cultural competence before I underwent the multicultural training inherent in the plunge assignments. As the semester progressed, I found myself more at ease with cultural issues such as sexual orientation and was better able to engage with my client and other clients around these issues. Indeed, after a couple of months of seeing this client, I was able to have an open and direct discussion with him concerning his experiences of power, privilege, and marginalization in his context. I attribute my increased comfort and competence largely to the experiential and didactic learning that took place over the course of the semester in relation to cultural diversity. Thus, the plunge
assignments increased my knowledge and awareness of cultural issues, and empowered me with increased ability and confidence to engage with my clients in session around these issues as my own reflections, coupled with my discussions with peers provided a safe space in which to engage with and challenge my own schemas and beliefs in relation to multicultural issues.
References


