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Racial Group Membership and Multicultural Training: Examining the Experiences of Counseling and Counseling Psychology Students

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Abstract This study documents various process elements of multicultural training from the perspective of counseling and counseling psychology students within the United States (US). Using a mixed-methods approach, findings indicate that racial group membership is an important variable that differentially impacts White students and students of Color while undertaking a multicultural counseling course. Results of a principal components analysis revealed four components associated with racial group membership, including negative racial experiences and salience of racial diversity. Findings from a grounded theory analysis identified five overarching themes including intense emotional experiences, representing one's racial group, and issues of safety impacting course experience. Implications for training and future research are offered.

Keywords Race · Multicultural course · Student process

Introduction

Multiculturalism, identified as the "fourth force" in counseling and psychology over 20 years ago (Pedersen 1991, p. 27), has now become a staple ingredient of training in counseling psychology and counselor education (Pieterse et al. 2009) within the United States (US). Indeed, much research has focused on the efficacy of multicultural competence in both training and practice (Smith et al. 2006; Griner and Smith 2006). The research appears to confirm the importance of attending to cultural concerns in the therapeutic process as well as the efficacy

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of multicultural training approaches in the establishment of multicultural counseling competence. Specifically, Smith et al. (2006), employing meta-analysis, noted that multicultural training is associated with increased racial awareness and cultural sensitivity. In addition, Griner and Smith (2006), also employing meta-analysis, documented a medium effect size of .48 for psychotherapy outcomes with culturally sensitive interventions. These findings suggest that multicultural training is a necessary and important aspect of counseling and counseling psychology students' development.

Even so, there is a modest amount of research focusing on students' experiences of multicultural training. Such research reveals that multicultural courses impact both cognitive and affective processes and are reported as being associated with personal change (Sammons and Speight 2008.) Additionally, research indicates that racial group membership and racial identity are important variables associated with students' engagement in multicultural counseling (Coleman 2006; McDowell 2004; Vinson and Neimeyer 2000).

Studies that have focused on racial group membership have primarily examined the influence of racial identity on student outcomes in multicultural training. Findings suggest that racial identity development both shapes and is shaped by engagement in multicultural training (Heppner and O'Brien 1994; Neville et al. 1996; Vinson and Neimeyer 2000). The present research, however, focuses on racial group membership as a demographic variable, as opposed to racial identity, which is commonly understood to be the psychological affiliation one has with one's racial group. As such, it sought to examine the self-perceived influence of racial group membership on the process of multicultural training among counseling and counseling psychology students. Employing mixed-methodology, the study attempted to identify core aspects of student training experiences associated with racial group membership and to determine the impact of this membership on the process of multicultural training among counseling and counseling psychology students.

Multicultural Training in Counseling and Counseling Psychology Programs

In view of increasing globalization and more frequent cross-cultural contact, various fields in the helping professions have recognized the critical need for multicultural education and training (Arthur and Stewart 2001). Accordingly, courses focusing on diversity and multiculturalism have been integrated into the curriculum for a wide range of disciplines, and perhaps most notably within counselor training (Abreu et al. 2000). Multicultural competence and attention to racial and cultural diversity has become a core component of training for psychologists and counselors, and is delineated in training mandates and accreditation standards of such professional associations as the American Psychological Association (APA), American Counseling Association (ACA) and the British Counselling Association (BCA). Indeed, the globalization of counseling as an approach to mental health has resulted in multiculturalism being viewed as a central construct in the training of professional counselors in general (Lorelle et al. 2012; the Counsel for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP]).

Although we know that multicultural courses are increasingly integrated into counselor training curricula (Hill and Strozer 1992; Pieterse et al. 2009), and we know that this training is associated with an increase in self-reported multicultural competence (Smith et al. 2006), the specific variables and mechanisms associated with these positive training outcomes remain unclear (Sammons and Speight 2008). The few studies that have examined pedagogical and

process aspects of multicultural courses have identified the following training components as having a significant impact on students' self-perceived multicultural development: interactive and experiential activities, reflective activities such as journaling, pedagogical strategies such as videos, class discussions, speakers, and the influence of the instructor (cf., Heppner and O'Brien 1994; Neville et al. 1996; Sammons and Speight 2008). Heppner and O'Brien (1994) also found that insensitive classmates and students' personal concerns served as self-reported barriers that hindered students' self-perceived multicultural development.

Racial Group Membership and Multicultural Training

Among the varied factors associated with training for multicultural counseling competence, racial group membership has received modest attention (Sammons and Speight 2008). It is important to note that counseling and counseling psychology students both reflect and participate in social systems that comprise dominant and marginalized groups (Foucault 1980). As such, Chan and Treacy (1996) highlighted the fact that multicultural training often includes a focus on how marginalization and dominance impact students' experiences and explores how dominant groups marginalize and disempower others. They further pointed out that this approach asks students to directly acknowledge race as a significant factor in the American experience (Chan and Treacy 1996). From this perspective, it seems reasonable to assume that the examination of these power dynamics in multicultural courses may evoke differing reactions and lead to different experiences in White students, as members of the dominant racial group, and in students of Color, as members of marginalized groups in US society.

Numerous scholars suggest that students of Color likely have unique experiences and reactions to multicultural education, largely due to their exposure to racism and oppression in their daily lives (cf., Chan and Treacy 1996; Curtis-Boles and Bourg 2010; Jackson 1999; McDowell 2004). There is some research to support these ideas, with Smith Goosby's (2002) qualitative examination of potential racial differences in regard to multicultural education among graduate students identifying the following areas of impact: the manner in which students process information, the influence of students' previous experiences with discrimination, and the nature of the students' learning and that which students identify as most salient. Specifically, White students appeared to process course information cognitively, and reported learning the most information in the first half of the class, largely because the information was new and unfamiliar. In contrast, Black students reported more diversity-related experience and knowledge, and seemed to process course information affectively, describing strong emotional reactions to course material that evoked painful experiences of past discrimination. Black students evidenced a need to address and process past racial traumas before forming new insights about themselves and others, and they tended to report learning the most information in the second half of the class.

These findings were mirrored in a more recent examination of the experiences of students of Color in a multicultural course by Curtis-Boles and Bourg (2010). Their qualitative study revealed that the majority of students of Color reported personal experience with racism, and students' initial reactions to the discussion of race were related to their past experience of racism. Toward the end of the course, many students reported a shift in their emotional reactions to the discussions of racism, with the majority of students reporting increased empathy for the oppression of others, and all students involved reporting increased cultural

knowledge and insights. Like Smith Goosby (2002), they also found that students of Color tended to react initially to course content in an emotion-focused manner, followed by a more reflective phase. Additionally, a qualitative exploration of the impact of micro-aggressions in the classroom showed that racial micro-aggressions occurring in the classroom often led to difficult discussions about race and racism (Sue et al. 2009). These dialogues, if not handled appropriately by the instructor, often led to a harmful dynamic that tended to attack the personal integrity of students of Color, and reinforce negative racial stereotypes and biases of White students (Sue et al. 2009). These findings further support the notion that racial group membership may impact students' particular experiences in multicultural courses.

Although the above-mentioned studies demonstrate the relevance of racial group membership, other studies examining similar phenomena have failed to identify differences among racial groups. In their examination of students' reported personal changes following a multicultural course, Sammons and Speight (2008) also considered the impact of race. Specifically, they examined the differences among the frequencies of responses between White students and students of Color with regard to the types of personal changes reported, and the course elements linked to those personal changes. A critical incidents survey revealed no significant racial differences. Additionally, the meta-analysis by Smith and colleagues (2006) revealed that race and ethnicity did not serve as a significant moderator of outcomes associated with multicultural education.

Clearly, research examining the impact of racial group membership has yielded inconsistent findings, and an understanding of when, how, and why race impacts students' experiences in multicultural courses remains unclear. In sum, the counselor and counseling psychology training literature indicates that students often have different reactions and experiences in a multicultural counseling course, and that some of this variation might be associated with racial group membership. To date, most of the research exploring student reactions in multicultural counseling has adopted a quantitative methodology. The current research, therefore, utilized a mixed-methods approach in order to provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence of the influence of racial group membership on students' experiences in multicultural courses.

Purpose of Research

A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches is viewed as useful when seeking to approach a research question from different perspectives (Hanson et al. 2005). In the current research, we were primarily attempting to provide a description of the experience of multicultural training from the vantage of racial group membership, and felt that a qualitative focus would be useful for that purpose. We also, however, were seeking to examine the existence of various facets of multicultural training potentially associated with racial group membership and to discover whether differences existed in these facets across racial groups. In regard to this aspect of the study, we believed that a quantitative method would be best suited. In sum, our research focused on the influence of racial group membership on the process of multicultural training, with a particular focus on the differences between White students and students of Color, and we addressed this question using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The Qualitative Investigation

Participants

Participants for the qualitative component were 131 current graduate students in community/ mental health counseling, counselor education, counseling psychology, or school counseling graduate programs. Of the participants, 61.8 % identified as White, 15.3 % as Black, 11.5 % as Asian or Pacific Islander, 5.3 % as Latino/a, and 6.1 % identified as Other. Because of the low number of students in each racial group, for the purpose of the analysis Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Latino/a and students identifying as Other were grouped together. The majority of the students were female (86.3 %), and ranged in age from 21 to 61 years, with 56.8 % of them in their 20s, 25.9 % in their 30s, 7.9 % in their 40s, 8 % in their 50s, and 1.4 % in their 60s. All participants had taken a course in multicultural counseling at some point during their training or were currently enrolled in a multicultural counseling class.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through various nationally-based, professional association email listservs. The recruitment email asked listserv members to participate in the study if they were students in counseling-related programs and had taken a graduate level multicultural course as part of their program. The recruitment email message contained a link to an online site.

Five open-ended questions were developed and placed online along with a quantitative measure as part of the mixed-methods study on graduate students' experiences of multicultural counseling courses (see Table 1 for the list of questions). The questions were designed to allow students to think broadly about their experiences in the multicultural counseling course; however, the analyses proceeded to examine the responses according to the students' self-reported racial group membership.

Qualitative Analysis

Grounded theory techniques were adopted in the analysis of the qualitative data. Although developing a grounded theory per se about students' experiences of multicultural training was not the purpose of the study, grounded theory techniques were utilized to gain a conceptual understanding of students' experiences that was grounded in the data. Whilst various proponents of grounded theory differ in their epistemological and methodological approach (e.g., Glasser and Strauss 1967; Corbin and Strauss 1990), the current investigation was informed by Chamarz's (2006) techniques in her approach to grounded theory.

Chamarz's (2006) grounded theory methods are based on a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that "neither data nor theories are discovered" (p. 10) but are, rather, constructed by

Table 1 Open-ended questions for qualitative analysis

1. Please describe your general experience in the multicultural course.
2. In which way did your racial group membership influence your experience in the multicultural course?
3. Please describe your comfort level in your multicultural course.
4. What were some of the emotions you experienced during your multicultural course?
5. How did your multicultural course influence your self-efficacy?

the researcher. As such, Charmaz acknowledges that both the participants' understandings of their reality and the researchers' understandings of the data are interpretive; that is, they reflect the participants and researchers' understandings, rather than objective truths.

The first step of data analysis in Chamarz's (2006) grounded theory method is initial coding, which involves studying segments of data and making analytic interpretations. Charmaz encourages the use of gerunds—that is, the noun form of verbs—in coding to stay attuned to the process and fluidity of the data. The researchers should stay close to the data while remaining open to the analytic import of the data. The second step in data analysis is focused coding, which allows the researchers to integrate larger chunks of data into a conceptual frame. Focused codes are based on the most frequent or the most significant initial codes that allow for an incisive understanding of the data. Theoretical coding, as a third step in Charmaz's method, then follows focused coding and is meant to delineate the relationships between the categories developed in focused coding. However, given the particular purpose of this study, theoretical coding was not used.

Prior to the analysis, the researchers in the study (one Black male faculty member, one Asian female graduate student, and one White female graduate student) met to discuss their biases and expectancies, including the potential impact of their own racial group membership, racial identity, and experiences with multicultural counseling courses as students and instructors, on their interpretation of the data. One expectation going into the study, which was shared by all three of the researchers, was that students would have different experiences of their multicultural courses according to their racial group membership. For example, the principal investigator had the bias that students of color would go into their multicultural course expecting a hostile environment and feeling the need to defend themselves. Discussion of biases and expectations also continued throughout the analysis. For example, the researchers shared the experience of being reminded of encounters they had had with others from their past—e.g., past students in multicultural courses taught by the researchers or people from their place-of-origin—as they read the qualitative responses.

The researchers acknowledged the ways in which the racial makeup of the research team might influence the analysis (i.e., potentially greater empathy for the experiences of students of Color) as well as the importance of attending to the power dynamics within their group (i.e., actively working to value each researcher's voice, despite an inherent hierarchy between faculty and graduate students). The researchers also discussed their ontological and epistemological perspectives and how these might impact the data analysis. Two of the three researchers were more comfortable with a constructivist research paradigm, while the third expressed greater comfort with positivistic quantitative research, but remained open to constructivist qualitative research. Such discussions of personal biases and approaches to research are considered crucial in researchers' ongoing reflexivity; i.e., the explicit acknowledgment of how researchers are situated within the phenomenon they study and how such positioning affects the research undertaken (Morrow 2007).

The researchers coded the data individually and met several times throughout the analysis to compare and discuss their codes. No attempts were made during the initial coding to reach consensus. However, it turned out that no great discrepancies existed among the initial codes created by the three researchers. After the initial coding of data from the first 30 participants (16 White students and 14 students of Color), the researchers determined that no new codes were emerging. Thus, the researchers then generated focused codes based on the most frequent or most significant initial codes (see Chamarz 2006). The researchers individually used these focused codes to sift through the rest of the data. The codes were compared with the data to

ensure that they incorporated the additional data. New focused codes were added by each researcher when other significant or common themes emerged. The researchers then met again to discuss the final focused codes.

Chamarz (2006) encourages memo-writing as a means of "conversing with [one]self" (p. 72) throughout the analytic process to record and develop insights about the data. As such, the researchers utilized memos to record their thoughts and shared these with each other during the meetings. These contributed to further discussions about the codes and emerging themes. No significant disagreements were noted among the researchers. Any discrepancies that did exist were resolved through discussion.

Qualitative Analysis Results

As a result of the analysis, a number of themes and subthemes were identified, which described graduate students' experiences in multicultural courses. Specifically, all students, regardless of racial group membership, described common main themes. Within these main themes, various subthemes emerged, which differed based on racial group membership (see Table 2).

Five main themes were identified as being common among all students: (a) *impact of classroom diversity*, (b) *representing one's racial group*, (c) *having intense emotional experiences*, (d) *safety issues impacting course experience*, and (e) *personal/professional growth*. Although these over-arching themes captured experiences identified by all students, the specifics of how these themes were experienced and the sources from which they derived

Table 2 Qualitative themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes	
	Students of Color	White students
Impact of classroom diversity	Feeling connected to other minorities Feeling singled out Feeling curious about others' experiences	Feeling vulnerable/uncomfortable Feeling curious/learning from others' experience
Representing one's racial group	Being impacted by the majority Feeling the need to educate/represent Confirming previous perceptions	Feeling attacked/targeted Feeling the need to defend racial group Feeling embarrassed by other White students Feeling the need to claim cultural identity
Having intense emotional experiences	Feeling anger and frustration related to experiencing racism in the classroom Feeling sadness related to general experiences of racism Feeling overwhelmed	Feeling guilt/shame about privilege Feeling attacked/targeted Feeling overwhelmed
Safety impacting course experience	Feeling safe with other students or instructors of Color Disconnecting/checking out when feeling unsafe Feeling tension among classmates	Impact of Instructor
Personal/professional growth	No subthemes identified	

differed, depending on students' racial group membership. As such, distinct subthemes were identified for White students and for students of Color.

Impact of Classroom Diversity

Among all students, regardless of race, the makeup of the class appeared to impact their experiences in the course. However, the ways in which classroom diversity influenced students' experiences differed, based on racial group membership. For students of Color, the following subthemes were identified under the main theme of impact of classroom diversity: (a) *feeling connected to other minorities*, (b) *feeling singled out*, (c) *feeling curious about others' experiences*, and (d) *being impacted by the majority*.

For students of Color, the presence of other people of color in the classroom appeared to be an important source of connection and safety. One participant noted, "I had some comfort because of fellow Black students. The instructor happened to be Asian and gay so that also made it somewhat more comfortable."

On the other hand, some participants felt singled out due to being one of few students of Color in the class. A Black student stated the following:

> After a discussion of black psychology, she [the instructor] pointed at me (one of three Black individuals in the classroom) stating that she wanted to hear from me. I was therefore forced to divulge my experience with individuals in the classroom who remained most of the time silent.

One Asian student reported, "I was also publicly targeted by the instructor in the class who openly expressed his discomfort with me due to my "unknown" ethnic background. It was very shameful, humiliating and uncalled for."

A number of racial minority students indicated feeling curious about how students from other cultural groups may be reacting to in-class content, as well as curiosity about others' general life experiences. One Black student noted, "I listened more closely to what people of other racial backgrounds had to say about the topics."

Students of Color also noted the impact of majority group students in the class. One Latino student described the influence of majority group students on the course in this way:

> My biggest frustration in the course usually comes up in the dynamics with majority-culture students. The class can become geared to them, or even softened up for them, in a way that makes the class less effective for students of Color who need a deeper experience or process. The differing identities creates a feeling of unsafety.

Overall, these subthemes clearly highlighted how racial diversity in the classroom impacted the experiences of students of Color. By contrast, the following subthemes were identified for White students under the main theme of impact of classroom diversity: (a) *feeling vulnerable/uncomfortable*, and (b) *feeling curious/learning from others' experience*. Although White students also noted and described how diversity in the classroom impacted their own experiences, they tended to describe feelings of vulnerability and discomfort related to the presence of students of Color. For example, one participant stated the following:

> I was glad that there were a few people in my class that were from different cultures, but I did worry that they might feel out of place or pressured to be a spokesperson for their

race. I felt foolish sometimes wondering what they might think of all us White people sitting around and talking about how embarrassed we were to be white.

Another White student noted, "If there had been some racial diversity—it would be a whole lot more difficult to be that vulnerable." This quote implied that increased racial diversity in multicultural courses might contribute to feeling less emotionally safe for White students,

Additionally, although White students also expressed curiosity surrounding others' experiences, White students tended to specifically identify the potential to learn about other cultures by hearing about the experiences of students of Color. One participant stated, "I enjoy my multicultural class because I am getting more interactions with people that I have not had much experience with."

Representing One's Racial Group

Students in their multicultural courses appeared to feel both internal and external pressure based on being identified as a member of their race. Within this main theme of representing one's racial group, the following subthemes were identified among students of Color: (a) *feeling the need to educate/represent*, and (b) *confirming previous perceptions*. Several students of Color described feeling the need to represent their own racial group and to educate others about their experiences as a member of a racial minority group.

Feeling the need to represent was experienced by such students as being either empowering or oppressive. One Pakistani American student stated, "I felt my Caucasian classmates had a difficult time but I felt in general that I was able to be a spokesperson for my racial group and that felt empowering." On the other hand, an Asian student described the experience negatively:

I also felt compelled to speak for people of my racial group, or that I would be the expert on the group when that was not the case. I also felt that when we discussed my racial group as a course topic, that I was viewed as though I were an example of the lecture (i.e., that those things, issues, preferences were true of me when that was also not the case).

Students of Color also tended to describe multicultural courses as confirming their previous perceptions or experiences as members of oppressed groups, which, in turn, reconfirmed their membership in their racial group. Whereas some students of Color appeared to experience this confirmation as negative, others appeared to find the confirmation validating. For example, one student stated:

In the doctoral program it was confirming of my perception of whites and their feelings about the discussion of race and their dominant role in the social politics of the United States. … It confirmed my feelings of not receiving an invitation of assimilating into the American society.

On the other hand, another participant expressed experiencing "Confirmation. To know that what I have experienced in America as a Black woman wasn't just in my head."

Within the theme of representing one's racial group, the following subthemes were identified for White students: (a) *feeling attacked/targeted*, (b) *feeling the need to defend racial group*, (c) *feeling embarrassed by other White students*, and (d) *feeling the need to claim cultural identity.* In describing the pressures associated with being a member of their racial

group, White students tended to express feelings of being attacked and targeted in the course. One participant captured this experience in stating, "There was a lot of 'white bashing' initially from a few very vocal and attention-seeking individuals." Another participant stated, "As an American of European descent, I felt that as a race, we are demonized and blamed for the vast majority of problems that other races and ethnicities face."

White participants' feeling of being targeted was closely related to another subtheme; i.e., feeling the need to defend one's racial group. For example, one student defended his race under the banner of a scientific perspective:

> I feel that it is both dangerous and unfair to single out a race of diverse people and try to lump them into a whole, and that whole being the one who is oppressing other races. This is neither evidence-based nor scientific, and this ill-founded belief is held by only a handful of scholars, yet my race is made to feel ashamed and ostracized for things which neither I nor my family have ever had a part in.

Additionally, White students tended to describe feelings of embarrassment in reaction to behaviors or statements by other White students in the class; as seen in this response:

> I was often embarrassed and offended. I feel that this was because many of my peers refused to recognize their white privilege and also refused to recognize the sexist and heterosexist nature of our society - both of which affect me daily.

Finally, White students described the experience of recognizing and wanting to claim their own cultural identity, which appeared to be related to their experience in the course of being identified as White. For example, one student expressed wanting to be identified ethnically rather than racially:

> I want the stories that my great grandparents shared, the ones lost to me in the mire of the 'White' label that negates my German, Italian and Austrian heritage. I want to be cultural, but my instructors were unable to allow this due to their insistence that I carry the blame and shame of being 'White'.

Having Intense Emotional Experiences

Although students of Color and White students all described experiences of having intense emotional reactions in multicultural courses, these experiences seemed to differ depending on racial group membership. The following subthemes related to intense emotional experiences were identified among students of Color: (a) *feeling anger and frustration related to experiencing racism in the classroom*, (b) *feeling sadness related to general experiences of racism*, and (c) *feeling overwhelmed*.

Students of Color described experiencing intense emotions in reaction to racism within the classroom as well as in society. The specific emotions described, seemed to differ based on whether they were responding to racism in the classroom or to generalized racism outside the classroom. Students tended to describe feeling anger and frustration in reaction to racism occurring within the classroom. For example, one Asian student reported feeling "Anger related to rationalization of prejudice and oppression or minimization of microaggressions." In reflecting on experiences of racism in general, students tended to describe their specific emotional reaction as sadness, as seen in another Asian student's description of feeling "sadness—due to the memories that came up from painful childhood experiences".

In addition to describing their emotions related to experiencing racism, students of Color also described a general sense of feeling overwhelmed in multicultural courses. One student reported feeling "Overwhelmed. Sometimes the discussions were a bit heavy for me and I would leave class tired."

Within the theme of having intense emotional experiences, White students also described this sense of feeling overwhelmed, and, in addition, seemed to describe emotional experiences unique to being a member of a privileged group. Subthemes regarding intense emotional experiences for White students included: (a) *feeling guilt/shame about privilege*, (b) *feeling attacked/targeted*, and (c) *feeling overwhelmed*.

White students tended to describe emotional experiences related to their racial group membership in reaction to discussing White privilege, including feeling guilty or ashamed of this privilege, as well as feeling attacked or targeted as a member of the privileged group. For example, one student expressed feeling, "Shame for being a part of the dominant and abusive race. Guilt for not having paid attention or noticed a lot of my assumptions before." Another student described feeling attacked and targeted as a member of the privileged group:

> I had a terrible experience in the multicultural course. My professor was very angry about her life. She labeled people and shut down any honest discourse or wondering. She taught us that race relations in our country are the same as they were during times of legal slavery. Only the mechanism has changed. She encouraged us to try to feel oppressed, even if we did not, because we were being oppressed. And if we did not experience the oppression, we were participating [in] and perpetuating a system that oppresses…making us active oppressors.

It was unclear, based on the quote, whether the race of the instructor (unspecified) was a contributing factor; however, it was clear that the student felt attacked based on racial group membership.

Similar to students of Color, White students also described feelings of being overwhelmed in multicultural courses. However, their feelings of being overwhelmed tended to be associated with guilt or shame. This can be seen in this student's description of his or her emotional experience: "Sadness, guilt, empathy, embarrassment, frustration: learning about history and what has been done, how far we've come and how far we have to go, sometimes led to being overwhelmed; like the system is too big to change."

Safety Impacting Course Experience

Safety appeared to be an important factor for both students of Color and White students in multicultural courses. However, their experiences around safety appeared to differ depending on racial group membership. The following subthemes emerged for students of Color: (a) *feeling safe with other students or instructors of color*, (b) *disconnecting/checking out when feeling unsafe*, and (c) *feeling tension among classmates*.

Specifically, students of Color often noted their sense of increased safety in the presence of other students or instructors of Color in the classroom. One Latino student noted, "I feel safer with more people of Color." Students of Color also described their reactions or behaviors when they felt unsafe in the classroom. One Asian student noted, "I did not speak up. I felt invisible during class." The student

went on to describe feeling, "Frustrated, disappointed, disconnected. As a result, I zoned out." In this way, some students of Color described disconnecting or mentally checking out from the immediate discussion when they felt unsafe.

A final subtheme among students of Color captured their experience of feeling or recognizing tension among classmates in the room, as described by one Asian student: "The experience in my coursework (both at the master's level and doctoral level) was challenging at times in watching tension build between my classmates."

White students' descriptions of safety impacting their course experience seemed to center around the specific impact of the instructor, and thus resulted in a solitary subtheme of *impact of instructor*. One student noted the following:

> I was not very comfortable. I would have been much more comfortable if the instructor was more assertive and had more control over class discussion. I felt like he did not create an emotionally "safe" atmosphere. A few outspoken students dominated all conversation and became argumentative and hostile if people disagreed.

Another student emphasized the instructor's behaviors as an important factor in creating an unsafe classroom:

> My professor was very reactive and argumentative whenever anyone put forth a question or comment. This effectively shut down participation. There were times when an honest discussion could have been very enriching, but it was absolutely not a safe place. It would have been extremely unwise to disclose anything personal in that class.

As seen in these examples, White students appeared to describe being particularly affected by the instructor's classroom behaviors in establishing a sense of safety.

Personal/Professional Growth

Both students of Color and White students described experiencing personal or professional growth as a result of their multicultural course. This was the only main theme that did not appear to have different subthemes according to racial group membership. A Latino student stated, "It enabled me to examine my own experiences and prejudices and to grow in my own racial identity, which I feel has provided me with a stronger background as a clinician." A Black student noted, "[The course] was very educational and at times it was frustrating. I have gotten so much from the course and I look at life as a whole in a different way." A White student also described personal growth:

> My multicultural course was one of my deepest learning experiences. I grew as a person. I gained a desire to do and see more, to question more, to challenge others more (but in a very humanistic way). I felt confident to speak up in class even in challenging discussions. Outside of class, I was seeing everything—the news, my life—from a different perspective.

In sum, findings from the qualitative data indicated that there were common themes that ran across racial group membership such as feeling a need to represent one's racial group, or having strong emotional reactions. Additionally, the data also revealed that the manner in which the themes were experienced and expressed appeared to be influenced by students' racial group membership.

The Quantitative Investigation

The purpose of the quantitative examination was also to identify various components of the process of multicultural training as informed by students' racial group membership. In choosing a quantitative approach here we hoped to identify components and to examine for differences in these components across racial group membership by comparing differences in means scores.

Participants

For the quantitative component 96 participants completed a Multicultural Racial Experiences Inventory (MCREI), a measure specifically constructed for this study. Demographic information for this cohort of participants was as follows: gender breakdown included 11 males (12 %) and 83 females (87 %); ages ranged from 21 to 60 years ($M = 33.02$ and $SD = 9.59$); areas of study included 38 % counseling psychology ($n = 37$), 6 % counselor education ($n = 6$), 30 % mental health/community counseling ($n = 29$), 5 % school counseling ($n = 5$)—the remainder included students from marriage and family counseling, clinical psychology, substance abuse counseling and school psychology. For racial group membership, 63 % identified as White, 12 % as Asian/Southeast Asian, 15 % as Black/African American, and 4 % as Latino/a. The remaining 5 % included Native American and Pacific-Islanders. All demographic data were based on self-report, and some categories did not total 100 % due to incomplete responses.

Instrument

Multicultural Course Racial Experiences Inventory (MCREI). The MCREI is a 19 item self-report measure, specifically constructed for the current research and designed to assess various aspects of student experiences in multicultural courses that are reflective of their racial group membership. In order to create a valid instrument, the following steps were followed. Items were initially constructed after a review of the multicultural counseling training literature. Additionally, the authors drew on their personal experiences as instructors and students in multicultural courses. Finally, a counseling psychologist who had experience in teaching multicultural courses and had a record of publications within the area reviewed the items for face and content validity. Feedback provided suggested acceptable face and content validity.

The initial item pool consisted of 47 statements describing various process aspects of multicultural counseling courses. These items were initially submitted to a reliability analysis in order to examine correlations among the items. Using a cut-off of .3 (Devellis 2003), nine items were deleted from this initial pool. The remaining 38 items were exposed to a Principal Components Analysis (PCA). Given the likely correlation of any potential components, an oblique rotation was employed using Direct Oblimin (Bryant and Yarnold 1995). The following criteria were used to establish the component structure: eigenvalue cut-offs of 1; examination of the scree plot for point of inflection; elimination of items with less than .5 loadings on a specific component; elimination of items with less than .15 cross-component loadings (Devellis 2003; Hair et al. 1995). Subsequent findings revealed a 4-component structure accounting for 54 % of the variance and comprising 19 items (see Table 3).

Component one included items that reflected elements of how the students' racial identification was presented in the course and was named *Racial Group Identification* (alpha = .82). Component two appeared to capture the experience of tension and conflict associated with

Table 3 Component loadings of the multicultural course racial experiences inventory items

Multicultural course racial experiences inventory items	Racial Group Identification	Racial Diversity - Tension	Racial Group Salience	Racial Diversity - Negative effects
1. Most of the potential obstacles for therapists of my racial group were explored during the multi-cultural class.	**.738**	.139	−.040	−.013
2. I felt my racial group was accurately portrayed in the multicultural class.	**.646**	.174	.069	.161
3. During my multicultural class, I was discouraged by the perceptions of those racially different from me.	**.695**	−.176	.223	.115
4. During my multicultural class, I felt encouraged by the reactions of those racially different from me.	**.578**	−.130	.206	.068
5. I felt comfortable questioning the assumptions about race made by the instructor of my multicultural class.	**.500**	.058	.025	.011
6. My personal experiences as a member of my racial group allowed me to truly identify with the emotional content of my multicultural course.	.226	**.526**	.126	−.024
7. I experienced some animosity towards my peers as a consequence of the multicultural course.	−.007	**.691**	.004	.061
8. I felt tension with my instructor during my multicultural class.	.091	**.728**	.009	−.006
9. During my multicultural course I sometimes felt hostility towards my classmates who were of the same racial group as me.	.142	**.689**	−.074	−.078
10. I did not feel any emotional bond with my peers during my multicultural course.	−.146	**.552**	−.058	.200
11. The development of my multicultural competence was aided by my interactions with those racially different than me.	.035	.370	**.585**	−.158
12. My progression as a multiculturally competent therapist was hindered by my interactions with those racially different than me.	−.032	.005	**.735**	.033
13. My personal experiences as a member of my racial group aided me in my understanding of the content during my multicultural class.	.087	−.133	**.613**	.010
14. My racial identity has been more positive as a consequence of my multicultural course.	.185	−.186	**.610**	.264
15. During my multicultural class, I felt encouraged by the perceptions of those racially different from me.	.176	−.021	.180	**.573**
16. My experiences during multicultural class helped to develop my understanding of racial groups other than my own.	−.054	.247	−.170	**.557**
17. I felt I had to speak on behalf of my racial group during my multicultural course.	−.195	.036	−.017	**.696**
18. I was discouraged by the attitudes on racial diversity during multicultural class.	.009	.102	.190	**.622**
19. My identification with my racial group detracted from my learning experiences during multicultural class.	−.132	.049	.251	**.616**
20. During the course of the multicultural class I felt emotionally connected to members of other racial groups.	.064	−.238	.079	**.662**

Loadings that are in bold indicate that the item loaded on the respective component under which it is listed

racial diversity and was named *Racial Diversity—Tension* (alpha = .81). Component three included items that addressed the importance of racial diversity at a process level and was named *Racial Group Salience* (alpha = .75). Component four tapped into negative experiences associated with racial group membership and was named *Racial Diversity—Negative Effects* (alpha = .84).

All items were scored in a positive direction; for example, a high score on the Racial Group Identification would indicate that the student experienced their racial group identification in a positive manner, whereas a low score would suggest the student experienced their racial group identification in a negative manner within the multicultural course. Because the response options ranged from 1 = Strongly Agree to 5 = Strongly Disagree, all positively worded items were reverse scored to maintain scoring and conceptual consistency.

In order to examine differences across racial groups, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted in which the four MCREI components served as the dependent variables and racial group membership served as the independent variable. Due to the small sample size, two groups were constructed—one consisting of White students and the other consisting of students of Color. Utilizing a significance level of .05, the findings revealed significant differences on the Racial Group Identification component *(F (1,95) = 7.199, p = .009),* and the Racial Diversity Salience component *(F (1,95) = 7.636, p = .012).* An examination of the mean scores on the two subscales revealed that students of Color reported higher scores on racial group identification and White students reported higher scores on racial diversity salience.

The findings suggest that for the current sample, students of Color experienced their racial group identification in a more positive manner than did White students. Furthermore, White students appeared to find racial diversity in the multicultural course to be more salient than students of Color. In sum, the quantitative analysis was able to capture various components associated with the influence of racial group membership on student experiences in a multicultural counseling course, and a comparison between students of Color and White students suggested that racial group membership did account for some differences in the process aspects of the course.

Discussion

There is a paucity of research on students' experiences of multicultural courses in general, and extant research has not focused on the specific role of students' racial group membership on their experiences. Sammons and Speight (2008) examined whether racial and ethnic differences existed among students of Color and White students in terms of personal changes in multicultural courses and found no differences. However, it is possible that the differences among students of Color and White students lie in specific experiences that are not necessarily identified as associated with personal change. As such, this study sought to gain a phenomenological understanding of graduate students' experiences of multicultural courses in general, with particular attention to how students' racial group membership impacted their overall experiences.

The qualitative data analysis resulted in the identification of five overarching themes for both students of Color and White students regarding their experience of multicultural courses: (a) impact of classroom diversity, (b) representing one's racial group, (c) having intense

emotional experiences, (d) safety issues impacting the course experience, and (e) impact on personal/professional growth. Thus, the racial group membership of the other members in the classroom appeared to impact students' course experiences. Students also indicated experiencing some pressure around being identified as a member of their racial group. It was also apparent that multicultural courses evoked intense emotional experiences as well as specific needs around classroom safety. Lastly, multicultural courses appeared to impact students' growth, whether personal or professional.

Despite shared overarching themes among students of Color and White students, there were also differences in the specific manifestations of these themes. For students of Color, classroom diversity appeared to influence their sense of relational connection versus isolation. Students of Color were also more attuned to how the course may be geared toward the majority; i.e., Whites, and their subsequent experience of being unattended to as the minority. It appeared that students of Color, who likely had prior experiences of marginalization, were more attuned to relational dynamics based on race, which in turn impacted their experience of relational dynamics in the classroom.

On the other hand, White students appeared to see students of Color as either sources of judgment or knowledge. Thus, Whites appeared to feel vulnerable due to fears of judgment by students of Color or looked to students of Color to learn about different cultures. These themes reflect larger societal dynamics, with Whites feeling the need to be "politically correct" based on fears of judgment from people of Color or viewing people of Color as sources of cultural diversity and cultural learning. These societal dynamics reflect the difficulty for Whites to take ownership of the problem of racism or view themselves as racial and cultural beings, and these same issues appear to be manifested in White students' experiences of multicultural classrooms.

Although both students of Color and White students had the experience of representing their racial group, students of Color described the pressure to educate other students whereas White students described feeling attacked and needing to defend their racial group. These different subthemes suggested that students of Color typically feel the pressure to be the change agent whereas White students feel on the defense about the status quo. Again, these themes are reflective of the larger society, which typically places the burden of changing racism on people of Color.

Although intense emotional experiences appeared to be common to all students in multicultural courses, students of Color expressed anger about re-experiencing racism in the classroom and sadness about societal racism. On the other hand, White students appeared to respond to learning about racism either with anger because of their sense of being attacked or with guilt because of their sense of responsibility. Although both students of Color and White students noted a sense of feeling overwhelmed, the source of this emotional toll was described differently among White students and students of Color. Specifically, when White students identified the potential sources of feeling overwhelmed, it often appeared to be a secondary reaction to their sense of guilt and shame or to their sense of responsibility as privileged individuals. That is, for White students, feeling overwhelmed tended to be related to their primary emotional reactions of guilt and shame.

The theme of safety in the classroom appeared to be central to all students in multicultural courses. However, for students of Color, the presence of other minorities in the room appeared to contribute to safety, whereas for White students, the instructor appeared to play a key role in their sense of safety. That is, safety for students of Color appeared to center around a sense of connection to other people of color, whereas White students appeared to look to the authority

in the room to establish safety. It is possible that this difference reflects the fact that White people are more likely to have had experiences of authority figures who are 'on their side', whereas people of Color may be more likely to have had past experiences of oppressive authority figures. Moreover, the difference may reflect the greater centrality of a sense of community for people of Color around their experience of oppression.

Based on both qualitative and quantitative results, it appeared that students' racial group membership played an important role in their experiences of multicultural courses. In some cases, students explicitly acknowledged the influence of their racial group membership. However, even when it was not explicitly acknowledged, the emergence of different sub-themes for White students versus students of Color suggested that students' racial group membership significantly affected how they experienced multicultural courses.

It is clear from the findings that racial group membership does influence the experience of counseling and counseling psychology students undertaking a multicultural counseling course. The data identified facets of the class experience that have equal applicability across racial groups. However, the manner in which the facets are experienced was partly accounted for by the students' racial group membership. Many of the differences in the experiences of students of Color versus White students appear to support the arguments of Chan and Treacy (1996), who suggested that students' experiences in multicultural courses are often a reflection of larger social systems of dominance and marginalization.

The data also suggested that strong affective experiences are a central component of the multicultural course experience. Findings from the exploratory factor analysis identified tension as one of the factors, and further analysis indicated no differences between experiences of tension across racial groups. Additionally, the qualitative analysis identified powerful emotions, including anger, guilt and shame. The extent to which the emotions are productive or counter-productive in training for multicultural competence has yet to be established. Feelings of guilt and shame have been noted to be both constructive and destructive in multicultural training, with research suggesting that the emotion of guilt might have some utility in motivating White students to be more racially aware. However, excessive guilt might also act as a defense mechanism preventing students from experientially engaging in the process of multicultural training (Spanierman et al. 2008; Utsey et al. 2005).

Implications

The study's findings have potential implications for students and instructors of multicultural courses. First, the findings suggest the need for instructors of multicultural courses to attend to students' racial group membership and its effect on classroom dynamics. Instructors should attend to how larger societal dynamics of oppression play out in their classrooms. Instructors may need to pay particular attention to the pressure felt by students of Color to represent their race in educating others, as well as White students' desire to learn from classmates of Color. It may also be important for instructors to attend to the ways in which the classroom dynamics and course content are geared toward White students, which may preclude the space for students of Color to attend to their own processes and learning.

Intense emotional experiences appear to be an inherent part of students' experiences of multicultural courses. The results of the analysis suggested that attending to the different sources of emotions for students of Color and White students may be important. Moreover, instructors may need to provide students with tools with which to deal with the emotions so that they do not feel overwhelmed by them (Rooney et al. 1998). Closely related to students'

emotional experiences appeared to be the issue of safety in the classroom. For students of Color, the instructor's racial group membership, as well as the diversity of students in the class, may play a key role in their sense of safety. This suggests that instructors may need to be especially aware of the impact of their own racial group membership. For White students, the sense that the instructor is not attacking them and that the instructor is capable of managing difficult dialogues may be important in establishing safety.

Lastly, students overall, regardless of racial group membership, appeared to experience personal and professional growth through their multicultural courses. The fact that for this theme different subthemes did not emerge according to racial group membership echoes Sammons and Speights' (2008) study, which found essentially no differences among White students and students of Color in their experiences of personal change. However, it is important to note that not all students identified growth resulting from the courses. It is possible that the other themes that emerged in the study, including the impact of classroom diversity, safety in the classroom, and intense emotional experiences, play a role in whether students experience personal and professional growth.

Limitations and Conclusions

The potential implications of the findings do, however, need to be tempered due to limitations associated with the research. With regard to the qualitative data, due the particular online strategy no follow-up questions could be asked, making it difficult to clarify meanings or elaborate on emerging themes. Moreover, despite using grounded theory techniques, this was not a grounded theory study; as such, the results provide descriptive information on graduate students' experiences in multicultural courses rather than a theoretical framework. In terms of the quantitative data, the most significant limitation pertains to the sample size employed for the factor analysis. Additionally, in view of the lack of construct validation in the current analysis, the robustness of the factor structure is unclear, as is the impact of the small sample size. Future investigations employing larger samples could seek to either confirm the factor structure or revise as needed.

A further limitation pertains to the small sample size that precluded an analysis of differences among various racial groups. As has been stated elsewhere, the grouping together of individuals of Color into a single group in multicultural research, prevents an understanding of heterogeneity that might exist within the sample (Delgado-Romero et al. 2005). Additionally, the lack of information with regard to the racial group membership of the instructors of the multicultural courses limited a fuller understanding of the impact of the course instructor. Lastly, given the methodology employed, the study's findings are limited to its particular sample and, therefore, generalization to the larger group of counseling and counseling psychology graduate students is not warranted at this stage.

Although the current research reveals important limitations that might preclude more definitive statements, the study does remind us of the importance of race and suggests that racial group membership may indeed impact graduate students' experiences in multicultural courses. The study also provides information on potential commonalities and differences between the experiences of students of Color and White students, which have implications for instructors of multicultural courses.

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