

# The Use of the Cultural Life Story in Multicultural Education

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Developing a curriculum for multicultural counseling course may pose several challenges to the instructor (Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke & Sanchez, 1996; Pedersen, 2000). What is the best way to promote the awareness of intra-group differences? What classroom tools enhance the development of culturally sensitive counseling skills? How is it best to help students understand the interactional effects of cultural dimensions in shaping an individual's identity? Instructors often supplement textbooks and articles that cover theoretical didactic material with popular movies, case vignettes, or simulation techniques (Berg-Cross & Chinen, 1995; Hudock & Worden, 2001; Kim & Lyons, 2003; Toman & Rak, 2000). Although positive results are obtained with these experiential methods, there are limitations. First, many textbooks or articles focus solely on racial and ethnic aspects to the exclusion of other cultural

factors. This may help with the understanding of values, beliefs and lifestyle but may fail to increase understanding of intra-group differences and may promote stereotyping (Thomas & Schwarzbaum, 2005). Second, although popular movies and case vignettes may elicit understanding of how socio-cultural factors shape identity, they are not always comprehensive enough to demonstrate the complexities of the development of the self in its multiple simultaneous contexts. In addition, the use of movie clips and case vignettes may prove to be limited to promote the development of culturally sensitive assessment and intervention skills (Thomas & Schwarzbaum). Third, the use of textbook material, if focused on one dimension (race or ethnicity or religion or social class), with the addition of case vignettes or movie clips may do little to invoke self-awareness of the future counselor. Finally, the traditional multicultural competency training literature relies on several assumptions. One assumption is that the main objective of a multicultural counseling class is to educate the White middle class counselor on how to become multiculturally competent with clients of color (Terry, 2005) or immigrants. Another assumption is that the instructors themselves already *have* the awareness of beliefs, worldview and the clinical skills and have them available to *give* them to their students, who don't have the skills (Terry, 2005).

One way of bridging some of these difficulties is with the use of the cultural life story (Thomas & Schwarzbaum, 2005). Utilization of the cultural life story followed by specific classroom activities can contribute to the understanding of the multiple contexts in the development of cultural identity, to the development of counseling skills, and to the awareness of intra-group differences. The use of the cultural life story can be implemented with students of all counseling specialties, in specific multicultural counseling courses or in any other course that infuses its curriculum with multicultural theory. Students are invited to write their own cultural autobiography, their life story, their identity and their experiences and share it with the rest of the class. The students are given questions to be used as guidelines for writing the story. The questions help students to think about their culture, the effect of their culture on their development and their present cultural identity. Some of the questions ask about the general aspects of the students' identity including their race, ethnicity, social class, geographic origin, religious/spiritual background and the relationship of these dimensions to each other in the person's life. Other questions address the challenges, resources, difficulties, and coping mechanisms used by the students in the course of their lives. In short, the questions are designed to help the students write about who they are now and about how they came to be who they are. The guidelines for writing the autobiographical life story can be given with the syllabus at the beginning of a course and students are can be told to start thinking about the

assignment but not to start writing until the theoretical material is covered. For a comprehensive review of the guidelines for writing the cultural life story refer to Thomas (1998) and Thomas & Schwarzbaum (2006). The utilization of the cultural life story in the classroom can serve several purposes. As an activity for the storyteller, it may elicit self-awareness about his/her own cultural identity, among other benefits. As a classroom activity, when each individual life story is shared with the rest of the classmates, it can be used to learn culturally sensitive counseling skills, to increase awareness of countertransferential reactions, to promote understanding of interactional effects of cultural dimensions on identity and to understand intra-group differences. In addition, because the autobiographical life stories are shared by the students with each other, multicultural competency is not something that only the instructor *has* which he/she then *gives* to the students.

Students receiving the description of the assignment to write their cultural life story at the beginning of the course may confront a variety of reactions. Some students may state that they know exactly what they are going to write about; others may express hesitation, stating that they don't know what to write about. It not unusual for students to think that they do not know what their cultural identity is, and they might have a hard time connecting how they are today with the sociocultural factors that influence their identity. Once finished, students' life stories will contain, in addition to descriptions of other dimensions, descriptions of their family life, their childhoods, their experiences in school, in their neighborhoods and their choice of careers, which makes this assignment suitable for counselors of all specialties. Once the students complete the assignment, the cultural life stories can be distributed among classmates or read by each individual storyteller to the rest of the class.

Following are examples of classroom activities that can be introduced after the reading of each story.

- 1) Name the themes in the story
- 2) Elicit assessment questions that could stem from the themes of the story
- 3) Design clinical interventions based on the themes of the story and the assessment questions.
- 4) Name and discuss the countertransferential reactions that the student/counselor has as a result of hearing/reading the story.

Each of the activities can be spearheaded by questions from the instructor.

- 1) Name the themes in the story

- What themes do you see emerging in the story?
- What is the relationship between the themes?
- Do different students come up with different themes or are most students describing similar themes?
- How are those themes similar/different from the other life stories read in class?

The discussion about the themes present in the stories is a good way to relate the theoretical material read and discussed in class with the content of the real life stories. The relationship between themes and the effect of different cultural themes on the personality, lifestyle and values of the storyteller becomes apparent for the future counselor. This enhances the understanding of intra-group differences because the description of the content themes makes it easier for a student to connect how the contextual dimensions of the storyteller's life affected his/her cultural identity.

## 2) Elicit assessment questions

- What questions would a counselor ask following the themes of the story?
- Might other counselors ask different questions based on the same content themes?
- If there are differences in the assessment questions, to what can those differences be attributed?
- How are these assessment questions similar to or different from the questions asked about another life story or by another student?

Coming up with good assessment questions is a skill that future counselors need to develop. The storyteller might share what questions he/she may have needed or welcomed at the time of the events described in the story. Instructors and classmates alike can share their ideas for assessment questions. A discussion can ensue about different scenarios that might elicit different assessment questions.

## 3) Clinical interventions

- What interventions could have been used in this case?
- What interventions could have been used at different ages of the storyteller? (Childhood, adolescence, early adulthood)
- What interventions could have been used at different stages of identity development of the storyteller?
- What interventions would not be warranted in a case like this based on the age, the stage of identity development or the acculturation process of the storyteller? Why?
- Can the author of his/her life story give examples of what would have been helpful to him/her at the time of the events described? What interventions would not have been helpful?

This discussion may enhance the repertoire of clinical interventions because students are exposed to a variety of circumstances and events. The storytellers can share with the classmates what interventions would have been helpful to them at different times in their lives, the instructor can add examples of

interventions from his/her experience and the rest of the students can share similar or different interventions based on their own personal or clinical experience.

#### 4) Countertransference

- What countertransference reactions are the students aware of that are being elicited by the story?
- Are there differences among students with respect to their reactions to the story? To what can those differences be attributed?
- What are the differences in each student in terms of reactions to this particular story and how they reacted to other stories? To what can those differences be attributed?

This discussion is based on students' reactions to the stories. Some of the student's reactions may be universally shared by all the classmates and some may be specific to a particular student. It is important to explore the shared as well as the particular countertransference reactions, because that will increase student's awareness of how their own personality and experiences affect their reactions. This awareness, in turn, helps with the understanding that reactions to the stories elicit questions and interventions that guide the counseling process.

The use of the cultural life story with the classroom activities described above can contribute to the process of acquiring multicultural competency of students in all counseling specialties. Writing their own cultural life story and the exposure to several other life stories, followed by a discussion among classmates about content themes, assessment questions, interventions and countertransference reactions is training for the real life stories that counselors will encounter upon graduation and when they start to work with real clients in all settings.

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