

Counselor Education and Contemplative Pedagogy: An Exploration of Mindfulness Practices on the Development of Multicultural Competencies

Abby Dougherty

There is a growing interest in counselor education in the use of contemplative practices as a therapeutic and pedagogical approach. However, there is very little examining how contemplative pedagogical interventions can support counselor educators and their students learning the skills, attitudes, and beliefs needed to engage in multicultural competent practice. Major elements of contemplative pedagogy and practical applications for integrating contemplative practices into course work to support multiculturally competent practice will be explored.

Keywords: Counselor education, pedagogy, contemplative, mindfulness, multicultural, diversity

Multicultural competence is critical to effective and ethical counseling. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Program ([CACREP], 2009), the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014) and the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) Multicultural Cultural Competencies (1996) all speak to the importance of culturally competent counseling practice. To engage in multiculturally competent counseling, counselors need an awareness of personal biases, values, and assumptions that make up their worldviews, and need to actively work to understand the worldview of their clients (Arredondo, et al., 1996; Sue & Sue, 2013). The current literature in counselor education that explores the use of pedagogical practices to support multicultural counselor education draws primarily from constructivist-developmental or modernist teaching approaches (Guiffrida, 2005). However, contemplative pedagogy is starting to emerge as a compelling alternative (Babezat & Bush, 2013).

Contemplative pedagogy may provide another valuable teaching method to support multicultural education in counseling. Contemplative pedagogy could support insightful self-reflection as well as provide students with skills to better regulate emotions that may halt the accommodation of new knowledge (Babezat & Bush, 2013; Berila, 2014). The purpose of this paper is to introduce contemplative pedagogy and explore how counselor educators can utilize a contemplative

pedagogy approach as well as contemplative practices to support counseling students in assimilating multicultural competencies. The author explores how constructivist-developmental approaches are used to support counseling students' ability to recognize multiple realities. The author then introduces contemplative pedagogy and contemplative practices and their utility for counselor educators who seek novel approaches for multicultural education.

Recognizing Multiple Realities: Multicultural Counselor Education

A constructivist pedagogical approach is commonly utilized by counselor educators to teach multicultural competencies (Brubaker, Puig, Reese & Young, 2010). Constructivist developmental pedagogical approaches encourage counselors-in-training to explore multiple meanings as well as their own meaning making process. Eriksen and McAuliffe (2006) and Brubaker et al. (2010) addressed the implications of using a constructivist-developmental theory as a predictor of multicultural competence. Eriksen and McAuliffe (2001) discussed several reasons why counselor educators benefit from using a constructivist developmental perspective. These benefits included, (a) having an approach to teaching how to avoid categorical thinking that can occur when discussing social and cultural concerns, (b)

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emphasizing multiple perspectives, and (c) developing metacognitive awareness and empathy. For example, counselor educators who are using a constructivist-developmental approach may ask counseling students to explore their values and assumptions throughout their graduate programs. Counselor educators will lead counselors in training to explore how these beliefs inform their cognitive processes and how these cognitive processes reflect their cultural background to support metacognition and cultural identity awareness. However, for some students, the process of insightful reflection may be a challenging skill to learn and may be anxiety provoking. The application of a constructivist model may not lead to greater cognitive complexity as students may construct the wrong knowledge about multiculturalism in counseling as these students prefer to be “told” what they should know (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005; Perkins, 1999). For example, counselor educators using a constructivist approach may ask their students to explore their cultural identity and how their identity influences their thinking and experience with privilege and oppression. The counselor educator using a constructivist approach may teach with excellence, but that does not mean the student will learn. Greening (1998) noted that without consistent mindfulness to the cognitive process, benefits of a constructivist approach may be questionable. The student may intelligently understand the material, but not how this is connected to their internal experiences. Due to the fact the difficult emotions can come up for students learning about privilege and oppression, they will want to be told what do, or seek out a technical understanding, but not engage in the self-reflection necessary to be a multiculturally competent counselor (Greening, 1998).

When exploring regularly utilized teaching interventions in a constructivist approach, experiential exercises, discussion, lecture, literature review, and self-reflective exercises (such as journaling) are often used to promote self-awareness (Brubaker et al., 2010; Vaughan, 2005). These exercises are intended to affect multiculturally competent counselors. Difficult dialogues occur when discussing topics such as racism, sexism, classism, and disabilities (Brubaker et al., 2010). Some students will develop an awareness of their resistance while other students, unable to sit in discomfort for long periods, will consciously and unconsciously disengage from the material and the discussion (Brubaker et al., 2012). Exploring historical accounts of social inequalities can be painful for counselor educators and students alike, particularly when there is an awareness of how current systemic inequalities are maintained by privileged students (Brubaker et al., 2010; Curtis et al., 2009). After exploring cultural competencies and their intersection with societal inequalities, students are often asked to

engage in immersion exercises to gain exposure to different cultural perspectives and to reflect on any stereotypical thoughts or attitudes that arise within them. Despite a semester of classes focused on cultural competencies, self and other awareness exercises, some students’ initial emotional reactions and judgments to the material may hinder openness to metacognitive reflections. For even well intended students, this may mean a lack of awareness of how they perpetuate socially unequal relationships with their clients (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

The developing awareness of a counseling student’s cultural identity as well as their own awareness of metacognitive process is developmental in nature. Novice counselors, unlike expert counselors, may not yet have learned how to engage and use metacognition strategies (Chi, Bassok, Lewis, Reimann, & Glaser, 1987; Etringer & Hillerbrand, 1995). Counseling students’ ability to observe their own cognitive process, and that of their clients, takes considerable practice (Granello, 2010; Granello, 2011). Students who hold rigid belief systems may struggle with developing the cognitive complexity needed to be able to effectively shift perspectives - a necessary skill for self-directed learning and providing multiculturally competent counseling (Granello, 2010; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999).

Group discussion is often used to support metacognitive awareness, critical thinking and the students’ cultural identity development (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2001; Vaughan, 2005). The accommodation of new knowledge, particularly with subject material such as race, prejudice, and privilege may lead students to exhibit defensiveness as they let go of previously held assumptions (Eriksen, 2008). However, some students may not be able to tolerate the distress of cultural diversity education that challenges deeply held beliefs and those students will accommodate their beliefs rather than assimilate new multicultural knowledge. This experience would be akin to Helm’s reintegration status stage of white racial identity development (Sue & Sue, 2013). During this stage, white students who had made previous attempts to address their cognitive dissonance about white privilege, will return to idealizing white European American culture (Sue & Sue, 2013). Deal and Hyde (2004) stated that this can be a pedagogical challenge when the resistance manifests itself as, “provocative statements, superficial engagement, silence, or censorship of others” (p.74). When not handled effectively, discussions can lead to instances of repressive tolerance.

Repressive tolerance occurs when there is a discussion that seems to suggest freedom of ideas, because of students’ diverse perspectives; however these ideas are discussed within a dominant ideology

paradigm (Brookfield, 2005). This classroom dynamic can occur when students have not learned skills to tolerate their discomfort in having a discussion about race and privilege. Not having these affective regulatory skills can stagnate the students' developmental process and inhibit students in assimilating new knowledge and developing a deeper level of cognitive complexity that is needed to practice multicultural competencies. Counselor educators may unknowingly perpetuate classroom hierarchies that support a Euro-American centric dominant ideology as Freire (1993) noted. Freire (1993) discussed the importance of equality between teacher and student in co-constructing knowledge as a way to cultivate critical consciousness. If students are going to reflect on ways that they have experienced privilege or oppression, they need the tools to explore their internal and external reality (Berila, 2014). A contemplative pedagogical approach can support the necessary classroom conditions and provide the tools needed to engage in this introspective work.

What is Contemplative Pedagogy?

Contemplative pedagogy has been defined as, "involve(ing) teaching methods designed to cultivate deepened awareness, concentration, and insight" (Vanderbilt University, 2012). The definition of contemplative pedagogy should not be mistaken as merely a set of classroom practices. Contemplative pedagogy is an intentional commitment by the educator to approach teaching and learning non judgmentally, with compassion, and a present-centered focus (Grossenbacher & Parkin, 2006). A contemplative teaching approach is as much a philosophical stance or lived experience, as an intervention or practice utilized in the classroom. While there is some emerging research in counselor education regarding the use of mindfulness practices as a pedagogical tool (Buser, Buser, Petson, & Seraydarian, 2012; Greason & Cashwell, 2009; Rothaupt & Morgan, 2007), contemplative pedagogy expands the discussion by drawing from multiple traditions and contemplative practices. Contemplative pedagogy draws from many contemplative traditions that support a state of mindfulness, thus it is worth noting that contemplative pedagogy is also referred to as mindfulness education (Beer, 2010; Palmer, 2007; Rendon, 2009).

Contemplative pedagogy may provide an approach that offers a holistic teaching and learning experience. Contemplative pedagogy's focus on developing reflectivity, concentration, insight, perspective shifting, awareness, as well as developing compassion and empathy seems aligned for supporting counseling students' learning material that challenges their sense of

self. Current research into contemplative pedagogy in other disciplines such as psychology (Grossenbacher & Parkin, 2006), education studies (Repetti, 2010), social work education (Lynn, 2010), music education (Roberts-Wolfe, Sacchet, & Britton, 2009; Shipee, 2010), nursing education (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bronner, 1998), philosophy (Kahane, 2009), and religious studies (Murray, 2008) has shown that it can support increased concentration and attention (Drybye, Thomas, & Shanafelt, 2006; Grossenbacher & Parkin, 2006), well-being (Drybye, Thomas, & Shanafelt, 2006; Grossenbacher & Parkin, 2006; Lazar et al., 2005; Roberts-Wolfe et al., 2009; Wenger, 2013), social connection (Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008; Jennings, 2008), generosity (Jennings, 2008), creativity (Jennings, 2008; Roberts-Wolfe et al., 2009), insight (Grossenbacher & Parkin, 2006; Jennings, 2008; Wenger, 2013), and deepen understanding of course work (Chugh & Bazerman, 2007; Grossenbacher & Parkin, 2006; Jennings, 2008; Wenger, 2013).

Contemplative Practices in the Classroom

Contemplative pedagogies utilize mindfulness-based practices focusing on the present moment, developing insight, recognizing multiple viewpoints from a nonjudgmental stance, and developing compassion and empathy (Jennings, 2008). There are a number of contemplative practices from which counselor educators can draw as described in Figure 1.

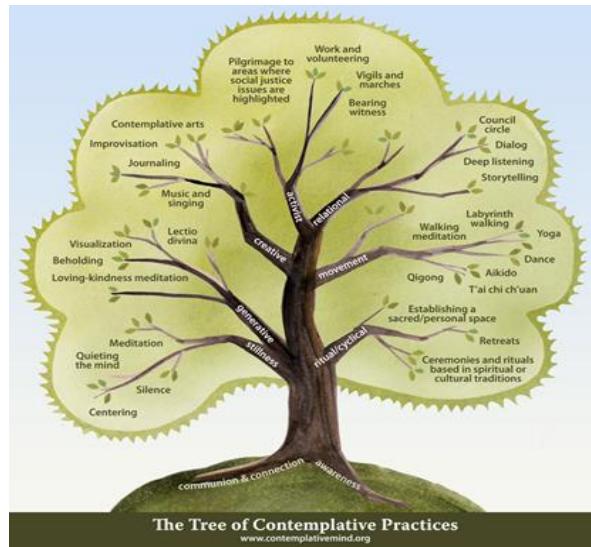


FIGURE 1

The Tree of Contemplative Practices

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Some examples of contemplative exercises being utilized include journaling, beholding (object, sound, painting), reading silently, lectio divina (meditating on what you read), meditation, yoga, and mindfulness activities (Vanderbilt University, 2012; Repetti, 2010).

The Judging Quality of Mind

Counselor educators who are utilizing a contemplative pedagogy can model for students the use of contemplative practices that focus on the awareness of cognitive processes in a nonjudgmental manner. Kabat-Zinn (1990) noted the importance of observing through mindfulness practice the context, development, and process of judgments' that frequently arise in the mind. Kabat-Zinn (1990) discussed how mindfulness practices can be used as a phenomenological tool to observe the unfolding of a reaction process. The process of observing the judging-quality-of-mind should also be approached by intentionally suspending judgment, by taking a nonjudgmental stance (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). This process of developing a nonjudgmental presence may provide students with an opportunity to recognize and identify their judging-quality-of-mind that they possess about diversity, before owning them as their personal identity.

For example, consider the white student who identifies the classroom discussion on white privilege as reverse racism. When counselor educators use contemplative practices in their pedagogical approach to multicultural studies, there is the possibility for stronger engagement when students are challenged by having to assimilate multicultural education that will shift their own value and belief systems (Berila, 2014). Students may be more open and receptive to understanding their learning process, rather than being reactive and conforming to the status quo, if they can respond to their internal experience as separate from their sense of self. For example, if students can speak about their process of understanding as an affective, emotional, cognitive, response separate from their sense of self, they may be more responsive to feedback that differs from their own belief system (Berila, 2014).

Contemplative pedagogy can be used as an approach to teaching multicultural competencies, however contemplative practices can also be embedded into the counseling curricula and used as a method of inquiry (Burggraf & Grossenbacher, 2007). An example of such embedding would be counseling students being asked to reflect on their cultural identity using a cultural identity model. Using a contemplative approach, students may be asked to periodically check-in within themselves to examine their thoughts and affective states. This process may bring about deeper levels of awareness and serves as an exercise to support reflectivity. Counselors, who actively attend to cultural

dimensions in counseling, must be able to engage in a reflective process that recognizes multiple realities (Sue & Sue, 2013). Multiculturally competent counselors need to have a deeper sense of self-awareness (Arredondo, et al., 1996). Contemplative approaches, such as mindfulness practices, focus on the observation of one's thoughts and emotions in a nonjudgmental, total acceptance manner that supports counselors-in-training developing a deeper sense of self-awareness (Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008). Students have an opportunity, through using contemplative activities, to develop a deeper sense of any unconscious cognitions or affective responses in the present moment.

The process of using mindfulness as a learning strategy supports the development of self-reflection (Dray & Wisneskim, 2011). In classroom practice, students who are asked to share their cultural identities with one another could be asked to view their identities as objects outside of themselves and then be asked to reflect on their experiences. Students may, in the process of exploring their cultural identity, cling to their habitual thought patterns and self-judgments. Students who are asked to nonjudgmentally explore this reaction are likely to be more open to conversations in the classroom about cultural differences because their anxiety rises (Berila, 2014). They become aware of a descriptive versus an interpretational reaction, which could be explored before engaging in the conversation (Dray & Wisneskim, 2011). Gudykunst and Kim (2003) defined descriptive reactions as observational data without social significance. An example of a descriptive reaction might be, Jane will not look me in the eye during our sessions together (just the facts). Gudykunst and Kim (2003) defined interpretational reactions as the social significance ascribed to the description (what does the behavior mean). Counseling students must remember that the behavior displayed in their counseling sessions can have multiple meanings (Sue & Sue, 2013). In the above example, Jane's not looking me in the eye during our sessions together might be; (a) a sign of disrespect; (b) because in some Asian cultures lack of eye contact can mean respect to an individual in a role of authority. The strengthening of students' abilities to be aware in the present moment takes on a cognitive perspective that encourages acceptance and a nonjudgmental stance that can support students' awareness of multiple realities. This self-reflective process can strengthen the student's awareness of his/her fears that may result in flight from the diversity topic or lead to prejudicial inferences. This exercise can also be an opportunity for students to practice self-compassion and recognize feelings of guilt, shame, depression, anger, and resistance that may arise (Berila, 2014).

There are numerous research studies that support

regular mindfulness practices with emotional regulation (Allen, Chambers & Gullone, 2009; Erisman & Roemer, 2010; Goleman, 2003; Linehan, Bohus, & Lynch, 2007; Nielsen & Kaszniak, 2006). Grace (2011) noted students who employ meditative practices have an easier time with self-regulating behaviors and can move more easily from a stressful to a positive state. Thornton and McEntee (1995) and Berlia (2014) found that mindfulness practices focus an attentiveness and a nonjudgmental stance, and can provide the learner with a compassionate mindset that may ease the fear, guilt, and or shame associated with unresolved identity conflicts. Multicultural education enables the learner to shift focus from the “physical domain of substance and tangible (what we do) to the cognitive and affective domains of how and why we process information the way we do” (Thornton & McEntee, 1995, p.254). Mindfulness based practices can help a learner to explore their inner experience in a nonjudgmental manner and therefore aid in cultural self-reflection (Berlia, 2014).

For students who are engaging in difficult dialogues about diversity and societal systematic social injustices, the regular use of mindfulness-based practices can help with perspective-shifting and changes in cognitive frames (for example, shame or guilt and defensive prejudicial beliefs). The student has the opportunity to bring analysis to their thought processes before identifying with them as a belief system that is reflective of their personal identity, thus enabling them to not be forced to see the conversation that may challenge deeply held beliefs as personal attacks (Berlia, 2014). By cultivating awareness and attention, counseling students can examine their worldview assumptions through acute awareness of their words and behaviors (Langer, 1989; Thomas, 2006).

Applications in the Classroom

I have used a five minute Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction meditation, followed by a YouTube clip of Kabat-Zinn (2013) discussing the nine attitudes one should cultivate with a mindfulness practice, in my multicultural counseling course. Kabat-Zinn (2013) identified nine attitudes of mindfulness that one seeks to cultivate through mindfulness practice. The nine attitudes include: (a) non-judging, (b) patience, (c) beginners mind, (d) trust, (e) non-striving, (f) letting go, (g) gratitude, (h) generosity, and (i) acceptance. After engaging in the short meditation, and then watching one of the short videos describing an aspect of a mindful attitude, I would ask students to seek to cultivate the one attitude towards the course material that we were focusing on that day. For example, during a class which was focusing on cultural development models, students

watched the Kabat-Zinn’s YouTube (2013) video on letting-go. In the video Kabat-Zinn (2013), discussed how monkey traps are set by carving out a coconut, placing a banana inside, and making a hole just large enough for a monkeys hand to go inside. In order for the monkey’s hand not to get trapped, they must be willing to let go of the banana. This metaphor was linked to the process that occurs when white students confront their own white privilege. I then did a mindful check-in, asking students to just notice and not judge their current lived experience. I used this check-in to process, as a class, any difficult emotions that students were experiencing in the moment while they were learning the material.

I have also used “beholding” in my family counseling course as a way to observe the layers of assumptions a counselor-in-training may have about a family, based on their cultural identity. Beholding is meditating on an object, sound, image (Contemplative Mind in Society, 2015). After introducing multicultural counseling in a family counseling context through class readings, I used 30 minutes to introduce mindfulness to the class using mini-lecture and experiential exercises. Following this introduction, at the end of each class, I displayed a picture of a culturally diverse family and asked students to meditate on the image, using the image as an object to focus their meditation. After a five minute period engaging in “b beholding” I would ask them to reflect on the new material learned in class that day, and to see if they noticed any new aspects about the assumptions they had of this family that were reflective of their cultural identities. Using this process, I observed that students felt more comfortable sharing their insights, took more time to explore their experiences in the here-and-now, and students asked me for more opportunities to engage in different types of mindfulness practices.

The Importance of Practice

One unique aspect of contemplative pedagogy is that it focuses on the personal transformation of the teacher as well as the student (Brown, n.d.). This is a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnected nature of growth and development for both student and teacher in the learning process (Barbezat, & Bush, 2013; Brown, n.d.). It is an essential component of contemplative pedagogy that the teacher engages in their own on-going contemplative practice (Brown, n.d.). Schoeberlein (2009) noted several benefits for teachers who utilize the practices in the classroom, these include: (a) strengthening teachers’ focus, (b) enhancing awareness and emotional regulations skills, (c) reducing stress, (d) improving well-being, and (e) enhancing classroom affection.

Contemplative practices may offer counselor

educators a lens through which to continually evaluate their own deeply held biases. Dray and Wisneskim (2011) explored the importance of teachers' continual self-evaluation of their own attributes that could contribute to communicating with students in a prejudicial manner. Contemplative practices, such as mindfulness practices, can promote counselor educator self-reflection and enable an examination of their cultural frame of references and their communication style with students (Dray & Wisneskim, 2011). Counselor educators, who continually bring mindful awareness to their self-reflection process in communicating with students, may have greater sensitivities in their own behaviors and communications. Additionally, individuals who regularly engage in mindfulness exercises seem to have an easier time recognizing how ruminative thought processes are affecting their experiences in the present moment (Abbey et al., 2004).

Limitations on the Use of Contemplative Pedagogy

As research on contemplative pedagogy begins to emerge, there are some noted limitations. One concern is that the roots of contemplative pedagogy and practice are derived from religious practices. Most the major world religions, Buddhists, Native Americans, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all engage in some form of contemplative practice (Coburn et al., 2011). Due to contemplative pedagogy religious origins, some counselor educators in secular settings may have concerns about its usefulness as a practical learning intervention. Contemplative, however, does not equate to religious (Coburn et al., 2011). Contemplative pedagogy in no way encourages a particular worldview. Secular and medicalized versions of contemplative practices (as discussed in this manuscript) and mindfulness are being increasingly utilized in a variety of education settings (Coburn et al., 2011).

McDunagh (2014) discussed how some people will not be ready to explore their inner self through the use of contemplative practices. Berlia (2014) noted the importance of educators, who are using a contemplative pedagogical approach, informing their students that the process of noticing internal experiences may bring up traumatic experiences. Thus, students should be provided information on where and how to receive counseling services. Berlia (2014) further noted that educators need to be prepared for what might emerge for students who identify as marginalized as they turn inward and explore their experiences with oppression.

Additionally, the lack of empirical research into the practical applications of contemplative methods may limit educators' willingness to experiment with such

methods. While most of the research literature currently available has focused on the impact of contemplative practices on the students' experiences with therapeutic presence and self-care, there is still little research exploring the experience of mindfulness and as a tool in multicultural education. Finally, there is a need to develop educational measures that assess the impact of contemplative practices and mindfulness within counselor education. There have been several studies using qualitative methods, but few controlled, quantitative studies.

Conclusion

The focus of this manuscript was to explore the implications of utilizing a contemplative pedagogical approach to teach counseling students multicultural competencies. Counselor education still suffers from a lack of applied pedagogical theory (Brubaker et al., 2010). A contemplative approach may have the potential to produce positive counseling education outcomes (e.g increased emotional regulation, stronger development of metacognitive awareness, greater ability for reflectivity and perspective shifting (Greasen & Cashwell, 2009; Jennings, 2008). Contemplative pedagogy in counselor education also has the potential to support multicultural awareness and competency development. The skills that are developed when one engages in contemplative exercises such as attention, focus, compassion, a nonjudgmental stance, the ability to see alternative view points, and reactive awareness are all skills that could support counselor educators teaching multicultural competencies (Berlia, 2014).

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