

Cultural Competence in Disaster Response: The Use of Critical Consciousness Theory

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Globally, there is an increasing need for mental health professionals to respond to the rise in natural and human-made disasters (Guha-Sapir, Hargitt, & Hoyois, 2004; Walter, 2005). Professional counselors have answered this call through their work in areas affected by hurricanes, earthquakes, and political conflict. However, there remains significant concern that counselors may not be prepared to deliver effective services in diverse settings due to limited training and experience in cultural competence. Cultural competence involves the awareness, knowledge, and skills to understand cultural values and worldviews and to develop appropriate assessments and interventions (Sue & Sue, 2003). The purpose of this study was to examine the use of critical consciousness theory (Freire, 2000) to enhance cultural competence and effective disaster response counseling services for counselor-trainees deployed to post-Katrina New Orleans.

Culture-Centered Disaster Response

Effective assessment, conceptualization, and treatment require an understanding of the cultural, social, and historical context of the client's presenting problems (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2008). For culturally diverse and socially marginalized clients, oppression and historical trauma contextualize an individual's mental health as well as predilections toward the counseling experience (Cross, 1998; Harrell, 2000). Multicultural counseling theorists and researchers indicate that interventions informed by a client's cultural values can increase efficacy by intentionally incorporating culturally appropriate coping strategies and healing practices (Pedersen & Ivey, 1993). As such, culture-centered counseling practice can increase the effectiveness of disaster response interventions.

Critical Consciousness Theory

Training programs and community development initiatives have used critical consciousness theory to develop cultural competence and social justice ideals due to the emphasis on awareness, dialogue, and praxis (Harden, 1996; Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003). The development of critical consciousness involves reflecting on one's personal biases, dialoging with peers and community members, deconstructing systemic oppression, and taking transformative action (Freire, 2000). Within the field of counseling, critical consciousness theory has been used as a foundation for cultural competence, social justice, and liberation theory (Alschuler, 1986; Ivey & Collins, 2003). Prior to the study, the researchers established a seven-step model of critical consciousness development that guided the training and disaster response protocols. It was hypothesized that as a result of involvement in the disaster response experience in post-Katrina New Orleans participants would demonstrate critical consciousness that would inform their disaster response and cultural competencies. The researchers asked the following questions: "What are the outcomes of incorporating critical consciousness in a disaster mental health counseling outreach experience?" and, "Does critical consciousness influence cultural competence?"

Research Design

The researchers selected culture-centered research methodology, borrowed from educational research, because of its emphasis on transformation and praxis (King & Mitchell, 1995; Tillman, 2002). Culture-centered research establishes transformation of participants and researchers as a key element from the study design through data analysis. There was a purposeful sample of six outreach participants, all of whom were female and between the ages of 23 and 53 with a mean age of 31. The study participants were masters level counseling (n=5) and psychology students (n=1) in counselor education and school psychology programs, respectively, who were selected to participate in the disaster response outreach to New Orleans one year after Hurricane Katrina. The ethno-cultural backgrounds of the participants were as follows: Haitian American (n=1), Indian American (n=1), and European American (n=4). Data sources included the participant's application materials (demographic information form, essay, and screening measures), as well as the daily journal entries during the outreach experience. Informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to deployment.

Once participants arrived on-site in New Orleans, they were provided with a tour of the city and the areas impacted by Hurricane Katrina by a counselor educator from a local university. During the remainder of the eight-day deployment, participants provided disaster response counseling to teachers and other school personnel at a K-8 charter school. The primary participant tasks were to: (a) provide counseling services, consultation, and referrals, (b) journal for reflection, and (c) engage in processing with peers and the supervisor.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved: (a) reading through the application information and journal entries and highlighting comments or phrases that were representative of the participants' experiences, (b) clustering highlighted statements into summary statements on the right margin of the journal notes, and (c) creating domains of meanings from the clustered summary statements. Data were analyzed using NVIVO (v2.0), a qualitative analysis software tool. Dialogue among research and member checking were used to develop consensus and ensure truth value of the data.

Results

Analysis of the data found six primary themes, which were then categorized into two dominant areas through member checking and critical dialogue. The first dominant theme, critical consciousness, was found to include the theme of cultural competence. The second overarching theme, meta-knowledge, included group cohesion, mentoring, transformation, and self-care.

Critical Consciousness

The results of the investigation suggest that participants increased their level of critical consciousness, resulting in greater cultural competence in their interactions with clients. Participants expressed a social justice-oriented perspective where client strengths instead of client deficits are the focus of the counseling process. One participant wrote about a meeting at the school, "As I looked at the fully-attentive, packed room I saw resiliency." Participants also noted the desire to empower clients and to create sustainable, culturally appropriate methods of coping. One participant stated, "The goal is to try and help them depend on one another, building the system instead of enabling dependency on us." Another participant wrote, "We are not here to influence their community in a way that they will feel dependent on our presence. ... [W]e could empower them to talk to someone that is a part of their community...."

Meta-Knowledge

The initial analysis of the data yielded four additional themes: group cohesion, mentoring,

self-care, and transformation. Through researcher dialogue and member checking these themes were reconceptualized as part of a broader construct, meta-knowledge. Meta-knowledge refers to the synergistic dialogue between two or more individuals that allows for new, shared knowledge to be created. Participants noted the importance of mentoring, reflection, and dialogue in their development of critical consciousness and their personal and professional transformation.

Significance

This study offers support for a training model that uses critical consciousness to instill cultural competence among counselor-trainees. Experiential and innovative programs in both national and international settings may be used to assist counselors in the development of cultural competence. Counselor education programs may choose to incorporate outreach experience into the curriculum of courses such as multicultural counseling or community counseling. Professional development programs may also use the outreach model guided by critical consciousness to ensure that practitioners responding to disasters in diverse settings are prepared to deliver effective services.

Future Research

Further research on culturally competent disaster response in a variety of settings is needed in order to expand on the results of this study. Longitudinal studies examining the impact of such programs on the professional and personal transformation of counselors could identify the long-term impact on individuals and also on the counseling profession. Replicating this study in various settings can also further the understanding of effective training practices for cultural competence. The researchers have since replicated this study in international settings with counseling students, professional counselors, and counselor educators. Preliminary findings indicate similar gains in the development of critical consciousness, including greater understanding of global socio-political issues and the role of community-based counseling.

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