

An International Learning Experience: Looking at Multicultural Competence Development through the Lens of Relational-Cultural Theory

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Relational-cultural theory (RCT) proposes that establishing and fostering positive relationships are central to human development, as well as self-awareness and culturally sensitive therapeutic skills. The authors of this study used RCT as a platform to interpret the cultural experiences and multicultural competence development of counselor education students ($n = 8$) who engaged in a study abroad program to Honduras. Participants' responses to four journal prompts given throughout the immersion experience were analyzed within an RCT framework using content analysis. Written self-reflections revealed that participants challenged controlling images and experienced mutual empathy, which positively affected relational connections with members of the host culture. Findings suggest that there is evidence of cultural competence development through study abroad programs under the RCT tenants. Implications for counselor education programs are discussed.

Keywords: multicultural competence development, relational-cultural theory, study abroad, counselor education, qualitative research

Counselors in the United States serve stakeholders from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. Based on the 2013-year statistics, the United States is estimated to have 316,128,839 residents, with 12.9% of the population born in a foreign country and 20.5% of residents speaking a language other than English at home (United States Census Bureau, 2014). In response to, and appreciation for, the great cultural, ethnic,

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and racial diversity in the United States, counselor education programs are required to prepare culturally-competent, ethical, and effective professionals to serve the needs of diverse clients (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). Counselors are required to be flexible, self-aware, and culturally-competent in order to establish effective relationships and work successfully with an increasingly diverse client population (Ahmed, Wilson, Henriksen, & Jones, 2011; Cannon, 2008).

Multicultural counseling has been recognized as the fourth force of the counseling profession (Pedersen, 1991) and cultural competency has risen to the forefront of counseling research encouraging further discussion concerning cultural awareness within the profession (Collins & Arthur, 2007; Okech, Atieno, & Devoe, 2010; Smith-Augustine, Dowden, Wiggins, & Hall, 2014). Much of the previous counseling research that focused on cultural competency has centered on the impact of the counselor's awareness of personal cultural differences and awareness of other cultures on the therapeutic environment. This research has revealed that being a culturally-competent counselor entails going beyond simple awareness of cultural differences and individual counseling skills and encompasses a much broader scope of activity and practice. Collins and Arthur (2007) included in their framework for multicultural competence not only awareness of the cultural identities of the clients but also awareness of the relationship of personal culture to health and well-being and awareness of the socio-political factors that impact the lives of non-dominant populations. In their analysis of the multicultural counseling competencies, Arredondo and Toporek (2004) stated that adopting professional competencies is indicative of culturally responsive practice. Their discussion also alluded to the ever-evolving nature of professional competencies, the need for further research examining client's experiences and mental health services, and the importance of advocacy and social justice.

Researchers have also discerned that many counselor education students feel that they are inadequately prepared to engage therapeutically with culturally diverse clients (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Hall, Barden, & Conley, 2014; Jaoko, 2010) despite that ethical standards require counselors to ensure that their cultural values and biases do not impact the therapeutic experience or outweigh the client's worldview (ACA, 2005, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2011). The current ACA *Code of Ethics* (2014) goes beyond awareness, emphasizing counselors' responsibility to honor diversity, empower clients, and promote social justice.

Contemporary counselors are facing a highly diverse client population and the rich foundation of multicultural competency research in the counseling profession has highlighted the importance of counselor awareness, knowledge, and skills (Ahmed et al., 2011; Collins & Arthur, 2007; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014). The challenge for counselor education programs lies in determining how to promote the development of multicultural competency in counselor education students within graduate programs that remain predominantly homogenous with the majority of graduate students in counseling being White and female (Cannon, 2008).

Study Abroad as an Experiential Learning Opportunity

Multicultural competency is clearly paramount for counselor education students and experiential learning in small groups has proven to be an effective pedagogical approach in promoting their multicultural competencies (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Johnson & Lambie, 2013). A study abroad experience can serve as an experiential learning strategy to promote the development of counselor education students. Study abroad programs can serve as opportunities for exposure, immersion, and interaction with diverse cultures and populations, which may contribute to multicultural competence development (Pope-Davis, Breaux, & Liu, 1997).

Study abroad programs can offer counselor education students the opportunity to better understand culture, tradition, language, and many more aspects of the communities they engage with during the experience (Barden & Cashwell, 2014). Immersion programs often prompt moments of critical reflection, action, and application in an ongoing cycle. This helps students learn about different cultures, understand their own heritage, and think critically about how personal experiences and history influence their perceptions of others. These hands-on moments have the potential to help a student feel more comfortable when engaging with diverse clients, as well as increasing self-confidence and awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses (Jaoko, 2010).

The development of multicultural competency is not an optional endeavor, but rather a critical foundation for effective and ethical professional practice (Arredondo & Toporek, 2004; Collins & Arthur, 2007). Study abroad programs may serve as one vehicle for moving students along the developmental trajectory towards greater multicultural competency. This article presents the findings of a study that sought to explore how intensive cultural encounters during a study abroad experience impacted counselor education students' personal awareness, multicultural competence, and multicultural sensitivity. To better understand their experiences, relational-cultural theory (RCT) served as the guiding framework.

Relational-Cultural Theory

RCT was created by Jean Baker Miller upon the publication of her renown book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976). RCT was founded upon the belief that traditional models of human development did not account for the relational experiences of women and many minority cultural groups (Comstock et al., 2008; Jordan, 2001). Western ideals of individualism, autonomy, and separation strongly influenced the creation of traditional models of development (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Jordan, 2001). In contrast, Miller (2008) believed that meaningful change occurs when we encounter new experiences, and these new experiences happen in interaction with others. Growth and development do not happen in isolation but in relationship with one another (Miller, 2008). RCT focused on development within the context of relational connection, placing a strong emphasis on mutual empathy and growth-fostering relationships (Comstock et al., 2008).

The basic RCT principle refers to the reality of relational connections and disconnections. While individuals seek for connection with others they may also develop strategies that may keep them out of the connections they desire. This phenomenon is known as the central relational paradox (Duffey & Somody, 2011). RCT theorists emphasize that all individuals desire connection, belonging, and social inclusion; however, they also demonstrate a paradox in the way they address relational issues (Comstock et al., 2008). Miller (2008) explains that even if people yearn for connection, they may also fear it as a result of previous hurtful, frightening, or humiliating relationship. Individuals will look for strategies of disconnection that keep them from connecting to others or help them keep parts of themselves they believe unacceptable to others hidden.

RCT aims to help the client move towards genuine authenticity and connection with others through establishing mutual empathy and growth-fostering therapeutic relationships (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Jordan, 2001). The term mutual empathy extends beyond the Rogerian view of empathy, which posits that the client grows in the empathic environment fostered by the counselor, to instead focus on a two-way exchange allowing both the counselor and the client to expand their knowledge of each other's worldviews (Duffey & Somody, 2011). Miller (2008) defined mutual empathy as a therapeutic relationship where the counselor is able to feel with the client and the client is aware of the counselor's empathy to him or her. The counselor should be aware of the client's feelings of connection or disconnection throughout the process.

The main goal of counselors utilizing RCT in their work is to promote clients' relational resilience and relational competence; that is, preparing them to seek and move towards growth-fostering relationships and mutual empowerment. RCT's basic constructs include: growth-fostering relationships, mutual empathy, connections, disconnections, relational images, relational resilience, and relational competence (Duffey & Somody, 2011). RCT terms pertinent to this study will be discussed in more depth in the Method section. RCT provides a conceptual framework for counselor educators and counselors in the search for multicultural counseling competence (Lonn, Tello, Duffey, & Haberstroh, 2014). Its emphasis on relational development, mutual empathy, growth fostering relationships, and empowerment (Comstock et al., 2008; Duffey & Somody, 2011) may be instrumental in developing successful international and multicultural relationships. RCT foundations also provide a social justice lens that may enrich teaching, research, and service for scholars in the counseling profession.

Previous Research on Cultural Immersion Experiences

Cultural immersion experiences provide an innovative, more personal, and highly authentic way to promote counselor development beyond the classroom walls (Jaoko, 2010). Counselor education students who engaged in immersion experiences reported an increase in multicultural awareness, as well as multicultural sensitivity as a result of their experience (Canfield, Low, & Hovestadt, 2009). Research looking at short-term study abroad experiences has shown that not only do students gain a greater under-

standing of how culture plays a role in relationships, attitudes, and values, but that having an abroad experience aids in participants becoming more aware of the roles of power and privilege (McDowell, Goessling, & Melendez, 2012; Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004). Furthermore, the inclusion of cultural immersion experiences into a traditional counseling curriculum has been shown to increase students' awareness of barriers that may hinder the development of therapeutic relationships and to promote multicultural competence development (Ahmed et al., 2011; Canfield et al., 2009).

Previous research on the development of multicultural competencies in students enrolled in counseling programs has explored international cultural immersions (Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004; McDowell et al., 2012), domestic cultural immersions (Hipolito-Delgado, Cook, Avrus, & Bonham, 2011), and the comparison between traditional multicultural course offerings and study abroad experiences (Swarzo & Celinska 2014). In their study, Swarzo and Celinska (2014), provide evidence that the format of delivering a multicultural course, comparing traditional on-campus courses versus international faculty-led, does have an impact on students' learning of multicultural competencies. The counseling education students who participated in an international faculty-led course showed higher ratings in personal growth as a result of interaction with an unfamiliar culture, ability to consider multiple perspectives in addition to their own, and linking class concepts to field work experiences.

Currently, there is a growing body of evidence supporting the impact of cultural immersion experiences, such as study abroad courses, on the professional development of helping professionals, including counselors. Although there has been limited research focused specifically on the promotion of multicultural competencies, the evidence supporting the overall positive impact of cultural immersion experiences indicates that this is an area ripe for further exploration (McDowell et al., 2012). Qualitative methods for analyzing the impact of cultural immersion experiences, including analysis of written reflections and individual and group interviews, have often been used by researchers (Ishii, Gilbride, & Stensrud, 2009; Jaoko, 2010; McDowell, 2012). However, due to the complex nature of the study abroad experience, sample sizes are typically small and broader generalizations are more difficult to make (Canfield et al., 2009). Additional studies are needed to better understand the impact of study abroad and similar cultural immersion experiences on the multicultural competency development of counselor education students. This study aims to explore the impact of cultural immersion experiences in the multicultural competence development of counselor education students. The following primary question guided the study: *Did the study abroad program, Counselor Education in Honduras, support the cultural competence development of counselor education students as explained by the relational-cultural theory?*

Method

A qualitative content analysis (QCA) was the method of analysis for the present study. QCA was chosen as a method of examining language with the purpose of interpreting the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and

identification of themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). According to Downe-Wamboldt (1992), the goal of content analysis is to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon. Krippendorff (2003) defined content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 24). QCA is a systematic but also flexible method used to describe the meaning of qualitative data. The basic steps in QCA are laid out as follows: deciding on a research question, selecting the material to be analyzed, building a coding frame, dividing the material into units, trying out the coding frame, evaluating and modifying the coding frame, conducting the main analysis, and interpreting and presenting the findings (Schreier, 2012).

A directed approach was utilized in this study to analyze extant data from a 2012 study abroad program. A direct approach of content analysis is utilized when an “existing theory or prior research exists about a phenomenon that is incomplete or would benefit from further description” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). The present study aimed to further describe the study abroad experience from a developmental perspective using RCT to guide the process.

Participants

The researchers analyzed the data derived from the interviews of eight counselor education Master's students who participated in the 2012 study abroad program in Honduras. Ages of the students ranged from 23 to 46 years with a mean of 30. Only one had prior study abroad experience. Five of the students identified as African American while the rest identified as Caucasian. There were six women and two men in the group of students. Six of the students were from different universities in North Carolina, one from a university in Pennsylvania, and one from a university in Missouri. All the programs were CACREP accredited. Five of the participants were in clinical mental health programs, one in school counseling, and two in college counseling (Santos Figueroa, 2014).

Counselor Education in Honduras: The Structure of the Study Abroad Program

During the Summer of 2012, a group of 10 counselor education Master's students set out from different universities in the United States to the capital city of Honduras, Tegucigalpa. The study abroad program was organized by a CACREP accredited counselor education program from a university in the southeastern region of the United States. The first author was one of the leaders of the study abroad experience. She was born and raised in Honduras where she was a counselor educator. The program was open to counselor education students nationwide. Eight of the 10 students that participated in the study abroad program agreed to participate in a previous case study based on the experience as a whole (Santos Figueroa, 2014). The present study constitutes an attempt to further analyze the data with a more directed focus on multicultural competence development using RCT as the framework.

During the 13 days of the study abroad experience, students were invited to partake in several learning activities including a national counseling conference, a university health fair, lectures, and site visits to different educational institutions and different cities in the country. Having opportunities to interact with counselor education students, faculty, and other locals, as well as visiting different sites and cities in the host country, exposed the visiting group to diverse aspects of culture, values, traditions, beliefs, and language. Reflection was promoted throughout the experience through group debriefing meetings and daily individual journals (Santos Figueroa, 2014).

Data Collection

After the study was approved by the IRB of the primary researcher's institution, the researchers collected and examined journal entries that participants wrote during the study abroad experience. Each day, during the study abroad experience, students were assigned prompted questions to answer in the form of journal entries. The assigned prompts focused on specific components of the study abroad experience. The journal entries were submitted via email, and only the program director and assistant had access to them. The prompts were created by the program leaders based on their experience; available literature; and the program's purpose, objectives, and itinerary (Santos Figueroa, 2014). Four of the journal prompts were chosen to be used as part of the present study (see appendix A). These entries selected were representative of the chronological time-line of the program abroad. Journal One was completed during the pre-departure orientation process; Journal Two was completed upon arrival to Honduras; Journal Three was completed on the 7th day of the program; and Journal Four was completed as the final reflection of the study abroad experience upon return to the U.S.

Data Analysis

The researchers examined participants' journals to gain a deeper understanding of their experience abroad and the impact of this experience on their multicultural competence development. The research team utilized Miles and Hubermann's (1994) interactive model of qualitative data analysis and followed the process of data reduction, display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. A model using four constructs of relational-cultural theory was created to serve as the framework to guide the coding, data reduction, and data display of qualitative data pulled from the journal responses. The fourth, fifth, and sixth authors assumed the role of coders. Each author coded the journal entries to identify concepts matching the RCT's framework of multicultural competence. Each coder was responsible for analyzing all journal entries and determining how data fit within the framework.

Once the coding was completed, the third author analyzed the coded data and when there was agreement across themes for two or more initial coders, data was reduced and connected to help to clarify the theme. Codes that did not meet the criteria were not included as part of the main themes of the study. Significant information that

was different from the main codes were noted separately in the analysis. The second author served as the auditor of the study and reviewed the process to ensure the accuracy of the process and product. Four of the fundamental constructs of RCT were chosen from the literature to serve as the coding frame of the analysis as they are relevant identifiers of multicultural competence through this framework. The constructs of RCT that were critical to shaping the coding process are described as follows: growth-fostering relationships, relational movement, disconnections, relational images, and mutual empathy. Each of these constructs will be introduced in the following discussion.

Growth-fostering relationships. RCT is grounded on the notion that people grow through and toward relationship (Comstock, et al., 2008). Growth-fostering relationships are specifically described as those in which all parties contribute and grow together making the relationship a priority (Comstock, et al., 2008; Duffey & Somody, 2011). Relationships of this type bring about a greater understanding of one's own thoughts and feelings, as well as those of the client (Duffey & Somody, 2011). Connections towards growth-fostering relationships are described as an overall increased drive to gain a better understanding of others and oneself, as well as striving to make positive relationships with others (Comstock et al., 2008).

Relational movement. RCT acknowledges that one of the challenges of strong connections with others is the reality and possibility of disconnections. The process of moving between connections and disconnections is considered a relational movement (Comstock, et al., 2008; Duffey & Somody, 2011; Stiver et al., 2008). It is critical for counselor education students to reflect on this process of relational movement to better understand how the therapeutic relationship develops in counseling. Cultural immersion experiences, such as study abroad, may provide an opportunity for students to engage in relationships that allow for this reflection.

Disconnections. Disconnections may happen in all relationships, for different reasons, and under different circumstances. RCT focuses on how individuals address those disconnections influenced by cultural patterns promoted by mainstream society. Biases, misconceptions, fears, power differences, and social injustices may ultimately result in relational disconnections. Disconnections occur when individuals fail to understand and acknowledge certain contextual factors impacting a relationship, such as people letting each other down, failure to respond empathetically, or behaving in hurtful ways (Comstock et al., 2008; Duffey & Somody, 2011; Miller, 2008). Relationships can deteriorate when the acknowledgment of relational fears, anxieties, and concerns about disconnections do not receive empathic responses. This also includes overt mistrust issues due to institutionalized racism (Comstock et al., 2008).

Relational images. Relational images are expressions of an individual's expectations and fears of how others will respond to them. Relational images, also called

controlling images, may interfere with personal strides for establishing meaningful connections. When the individual is repeatedly denied empathetic possibilities with other people, the person's expectations of relationships in general may develop into mistrust. When dis-affirming stimuli occur (racism, stereotyping, prejudice, etc.), one's controlling images become associated with those moments making empathetic possibilities with others challenging. One's ability to self-reflect and authentically relate to others may help in better understanding the challenges others face (Comstock et al., 2008; Miller, 2008).

Mutual empathy. One of the most critical constructs of focus for this study was mutual empathy as an outcome of the participants' engagement in the study abroad. Mutual empathy is created when both participants in relationship are affected and transformed by the connection with one another (Duffey & Somody, 2011). In the therapeutic relationship, this means that the counselor instead of presenting a mask of neutrality, will allow him/herself to be affected by the client's experiences. This type of responsiveness allows counselor and client to be affected by the experiences of each other and communicates this through actions and words. The development of mutual empathy may help the client to more fully experience her or his engagement in the therapeutic relationship and better understand how she or he is being understood by the counselor. Both counselor and client may benefit from knowing that the other person can be actively involved in the relationship and may be impacted by it, resulting in feelings of empowerment, connection, self-reflection, and hope (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Jordan, 2001; Miller, 2008).

Results

Utilizing the analysis process described above, four themes aligned with RCT framework emerged including: relational movement toward growth-fostering relationships, disconnections stemming from biases and misconceptions, challenging controlling images to build growth-fostering relationships, and mutual empathy connecting people across borders. The researchers also reviewed the data in search of overall multicultural competence development through the experience. The analysis provided evidence of multicultural competence development through the RCT tenants.

Theme One: Relational Movement Toward Growth-Fostering Relationships

Connections towards growth-fostering relationships are explained by RCT as the drive to better understand others and oneself, as well as striving to build positive relationships with others (Comstock et al., 2008). The movement towards those types of connections was most evident in Journal Three and Journal Four after spending time in Honduras. Journal Three asked the students to explain what they learned about themselves and to describe how it impacted their personal and professional development. Journal Three was completed at the midpoint of the program as a letter to themselves. Journal Four

was submitted upon return to the United States as a final reflection of the experience.

Participants' quotes serve as evidence of their connection with others and their movement towards growth-fostering relationships. By the end of the program, participants reflected on their possibilities for future relationships. Their reflections move from basic observations at the beginning of the program to deeper reflections on awareness and advocacy by the end. Participant 3 described:

The bus ride through both the beautiful country side and the visual images of poverty was one that bonded me to the environment. I had never seen up close the homes and living conditions of so many people of one population in so dire conditions. These images alone will remain with me for life.

Participant 6 stated:

Although I am a member of a minority group here in the United States, I still have a lot of privileges. In Honduras, I truly felt what it was like to be a minority. I learned how important nonverbal cues can be when language barriers exist.

Participant 1 stated:

North Carolina is full of people who have immigrated from this part of the world, being able to be exposed to their culture and a similar experience to where they may have come from will help me to relate to them and their experiences better.

Participant 2 expressed:

I would like to advocate more for minority populations especially the Hispanic population because I feel they are really misunderstood. Most people equate not being able to speak English as a sign of stupidity or lack of intelligence, which is quite narrow minded and ignorant.

Theme Two: Disconnections Stemming from Biases and Misconceptions

Disconnections are defined as refusing to connect with others due to a failure of acknowledging contextual factors that may impact a relationship (Comstock, et al., 2008). Disconnections are shown particularly on the early stages of the journey, most frequently in Journal Two when describing their arrival to Honduras. Participants stated that they were taken aback by the language barrier and the poverty in the country. Through their reflections, the students described some of their biases and misconcep-

tions. An example of disconnection was described by two participants upon their arrival to Honduras. Participant 2 stated:

Reality hit me hard while trying to fill out the customs forms which was poorly translated in English. And even more so when I ignorantly gave a horrible tip to a guy helping with our bags because I was unfamiliar with the currency.

Participant 4 described the same experience by saying:

I also noticed and experienced ‘working’ individuals who were at curb side loading luggage into vehicles without consent. Upon loading the luggage into our van, the ‘worker’ demanded a tip. My cohort mate gave 1 lempira and the ‘worker’ who had not even been asked to help in the first place, replied ‘nada’ and not knowing what to expect from this stranger, my colleague then gave him a 2nd lempira. The worker turned and walked away, and it was not until my colleague pulled out his exchange rate card did we realize we had given him the equivalent of a U.S. \$1.00.

Theme Three: Challenging Controlling Images to Build Growth-Fostering Relationships

Relational images are considered expressions of people’s expectations or fears of how others will respond to them (Comstock, et al., 2008; Miller, 2008). RCT focuses on how individuals address those expectations and fears despite their contextual background and lived experiences (Comstock et al., 2008). In this study, results revealed controlling images to be reoccurring in the early stages of the cultural immersion experience in Honduras. Evidence of controlling images and the ability to challenge negative beliefs was primarily found in Journal Two. Participants 1, 2, 4, and 8 all displayed both controlling images and desire to challenge these images to build connections with others. The following quotes portray some of the disconnections and relational images that participants identified in need of challenging in order to help them move towards building growth-fostering relationships. The quotes revealed controlling images influenced by the media and preconceived notions that depict lack of exposure and information about the host country and culture. Participant 2 expressed:

I knew that Honduras is a rather poor developing nation and I expected to see rundown homes and buildings but was quite surprised that the first thing I saw as we landed was the Church's chicken sign!

This statement reveals “fixed” images that reflect the participant’s belief of Honduras as a poor nation.

Participant 4 shared a statement that indicates the controlling images learned from the culture and/or environment of which he/she is from stating the following:

My television perception had me thinking and somewhat believing that this was a poor and poverty stricken country.

Participant 8 revealed controlling images brought on by the environment stating:

I was initially struck by how normal arriving to Honduras felt. I was surprised by the modernity and organization at the airport.

But further reveals the desire to challenge this image when uttering:

... I was then strangely affected by the way the highways and terrain felt like being in the San Francisco Bay area...

The controlling image lies in the participant's perception that Honduras should have been anything but organized and modern. The challenge is brought on by relating the experience to a positive memory of being in their hometown.

Another excerpt from Journal Two depicts Participant 1's ability to challenge controlling images. Participant 1 mentioned:

The driving from the airport to the hotel was much different than driving in the US, the roads are more narrow and it seemed like drivers were a little less cautious.

The last statement made by Participant 1 along with the previous comment of Participant 8 reveal early on, Journal One and Journal Two, higher levels of development in terms of awareness. As the results unfolded researchers found that preparedness and open-mindedness, at the beginning of the immersion experience, for several of the participants were significant in determining how much their multicultural competence development increased by the end of the experience.

Journal Three, which was submitted on the 7th day of the stay in Honduras and entitled "Letter to yourself," was significant because it revealed growth in the participants' development. This growth was found in statements made by participants that challenged controlling images. As mentioned, controlling images refer to the ability of the individuals to move past negative beliefs and perceptions, brought on by personal assumptions, through their willingness to challenge their own negative images. The challenges, and therefore a growth in development, were evident in four of the eight participants.

Participant 1 expresses that he/she loved being around people with a meaningful energy as he/she described:

I love just being out and around the people here. There is a different energy that the people give off here, it feels more alive. The people here care more about relationships where we get so caught up in the little, less important things at home.

Participant 2 is seeing things that are different in the US and challenging previous relational images of how people in Honduras are perceived as he/she explained:

Many of the things that we take for granted in the US are scarce here. Having to deal with a dangerous city, poor living conditions and accessibility, low income, and lack of support from the government day in and day out can wear on a person. Yet they flip all that adversity and transform it into motivation and positive growth.

This statement of Participant 5 is an example of how students learn and immerse themselves in a new culture:

To learn and truly understand the concept of one being different is NOT being deficient and that we all are unique according to culture, background, and class. Always remember to completely immerse yourself in your surrounding and to get outside of yourself which yes, I know can be challenging at times but please remember to do in the sake of respecting one's way of life.

Participant 8 wrote:

I know that you know this, but remember how hard most people in Honduras have to work for what they have and the kindness you were shown despite those struggles. Don't get discouraged due to lack of change and obstacles within complex family situations and community systems. Just being available, attentive and professional is the best first step.

All of the comments made by the participants in this journal entry reveal that at this time in the immersion experience they were moving out of condemned isolation into growth fostering relationships. Further these excerpts reveal that the participants were closer to accomplishing the goal of mutual empathy.

Theme Four: Mutual Empathy Connecting People Across Borders

One of the most powerful constructs to emerge from the study was the connection between engagement in a cultural immersion experience and the development of mutual

empathy. Multiple participants in this study abroad experience reported feeling appreciative of the kindness and caring the Hondurans showed them and they reflected on how they had previously shown limited patience and kindness to those they encountered in the United States who were not fluent in English. As a result of engaging in this cultural immersion experience and being in relationship with native Hondurans, the participants had opportunities to empathically reflect on how they engaged with clients and others in their daily lives in the United States. Through this reflection, they demonstrated their ability to recognize barriers that led to disconnection and will hopefully be better prepared to resist and/or overcome those barriers.

Mutual empathy involves resilience which is the ability to connect, reconnect, and/or resist disconnection (Duffy & Somody, 2011). Resilience, from an RCT perspective, involves a paradigm shift as was identified within the comments presented in Journal Two and Journal Three. Evidence of mutual empathy was also clearly apparent in Journal Three once participants began to reflect on their experiences and interactions with members of the Honduran culture.

The exchanges described by two of the participants showed collaboration. The exchange in the relationship seems to have given greater meaning to both parties and the opportunity to learn from the worldviews of another culture. An example of this is shown in the writing of Participant 4 who stated:

The campus visits are awesome and the exchange of knowledge and ideas between cultures and colleagues is priceless. I am even wondering if I will ever be the same again when it comes to dealing, helping and working with oppressed, deprived, marginalized, and poverty-class of individuals. This entire experience has revealed an even more caring side that speaks to the often overlooked classes of people.

Further examples of mutual empathy were identified in the Journal Four with statements showing reflections consistent with the concept of mutual empathy. Participant 1 described:

The people I met in Honduras would be apologetic that their English was not good, when I was the foreigner who had the responsibility to learn Spanish. They all went out of their way to figure out a way to talk with us and make us comfortable in the situation. The way I was treated has made me rethink how I interact with those who are ‘foreign’ at home.

In these examples, participants reflected in how the experience had an impact on how they view other cultures. This type of exchange is not possible without the individuals first challenging their own controlling images of outside cultures (Comstock et al., 2008; Miller, 2008). The powerful impact of engaging in cultural immersion experiences in which one self-perceive as holding less power or being in a minority

position may be leveraged to help counselor education students more fully understand the experience of their clients. Mutual empathy is an important construct and studies of cultural immersion experiences such as this one offer valuable opportunities for exploring how to promote the development of this construct with counselor education students.

Development through the Journals

Focusing on the overall multicultural competence development of the participants using RCT lens, the researchers found that several participants began challenging their controlling images during the experience moving towards relational competence. Challenging controlling images seems to have allowed them to begin making meaningful connections with members of the host country, develop growth fostering relations, and experience mutual empathy (Comstock et al., 2008; Jordan, 2001). The quote from Participant 2 is an example of this growth:

Many of the things that we take for granted in the US are scarce here. Having to deal with a dangerous city, poor living conditions and accessibility, low income, and lack of support from the government day in and day out can wear on a person. Yet they flip all that adversity and transform it into motivation and positive growth.

Two of the participants expressed a willingness to make meaningful connections during their experience, this interest was coded as relational connection in the analysis. In addition, there were a mix of controlling images, particularly in Journal Two. Some participants expressed their controlling images and others began to challenge them as they arose. Participant 4's quote is an example of challenging controlling images:

My television perception had me thinking and somewhat believing that this was a poor and poverty stricken country.

The movement between Journal Two to Journal Three showed that participants who were seen challenging their controlling images during Journal Two, were more likely to make meaningful connections in Journal Three. Statements of four participants in Journal Three were coded as challenging negative images. In addition, all but one, were also coded as making a positive relational connection. Participant 2 gives us an example of positive relational connections in the quote:

Many of the things that we take for granted in the US are scarce here. Having to deal with a dangerous city, poor living conditions and accessibility, low income, and lack of support from the government day in and day out can wear on a person. Yet they flip all that adversity and transform it into motivation and positive growth.

Interestingly, the one participant who did not show evidence of relational connection was the only participant in journal three to continue to express ideas reflecting controlling images. This information supports the assertion of RCT that controlling images may work as obstacles to meaningful connection (Comstock et al., 2008; Miller, 2008).

Two of the eight participants were not able to complete their final reflection (i.e., Journal Four) upon return to the United States for personal reasons. All six participants who completed Journal Four showed evidence of meaningful connections with members of the host culture, without any of them expressing thoughts consistent with controlling images. For example, Participant 1 described:

The people I met in Honduras would be apologetic that their English was not good, when I was the foreigner who had the responsibility to learn Spanish. They all went out of their way to figure out a way to talk with us and make us comfortable in the situation. The way I was treated has made me rethink how I interact with those who are ‘foreign’ at home.

Participants that received the most codes in Journal Three in areas of relational connections, and challenge of controlling images, were the same participants that expressed statements consistent with mutual empathy in Journal Four. The emerging theme throughout the journals shows how confronting one’s controlling images is an integral part of forming meaningful connections with members from another culture.

Discussion

Results from the current investigation, looking through the lens of RCT tenants, demonstrate that participants in the study abroad program in Honduras showed evidence of multicultural competence development (Comstock et al., 2008). Students entered the program with preconceived ideas of the host culture, based on statements made in their early journals (controlling images). The challenging of these images throughout their experience allowed the participants to create meaningful connections with citizens of Honduras (Comstock et al., 2008; Miller, 2008), allowing for the exchange of ideas surrounding worldviews, cultural practices, and social interactions. Several students made statements addressing feelings of being a cultural and racial minority, with the inability to speak the native language. Barden and Cashwell (2014) saw similar development and challenges in students participating in cultural immersions taking place on multiple continents.

The development that occurred during the students’ time in the study abroad program makes it a viable model for multicultural education in a counseling program. Elements of the journals addressing increased cultural awareness when making connections with members of the host culture capture student’s multicultural sensitivity. Prior research has demonstrated that students become aware of, and confront, their

biases and prejudices after being exposed to people from diverse cultures (Ahmed et al., 2011; Jaoko, 2010). Participants in the Honduras immersion program challenged controlling images by analyzing their beliefs and how they were dispelled through interactions with people from the host country.

There is evidence that participants experienced positive relational movement after immersing themselves in the Honduran culture through the study abroad program. By experiencing a positive relational movement, participants were able to transform previous negative controlled images and gain greater connections toward growth fostering relationships (Comstock et al., 2008; Duffey & Somody, 2011; Stiver et al., 2008). This positive relational movement, the participants' challenge of their own controlled images, and their connections with others are evidence of both an increase in mutual empathy and a greater level of multicultural competence. These changes also support the RCT premise that mutual empathy take place when all participants in the relationship are affected by one another and actively engage in the experience, in this case study participants and their relationships primarily with counselor education students in Honduras (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Jordan, 2001; Miller, 2008).

In a counseling setting, this type of connection would allow the client to feel the counselor's empathic response and provide a sense of validation, empowerment, and hope (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Jordan, 2001; Miller, 2008). In this study, the change is more evident through the participants' self-reflection, connections, and changes of their controlling images allowing for growth in the participants' perception of themselves and others (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Miller, 2008). The study also supports previous research stating that experiential learning such as immersion programs provide opportunities to create positive, nurturing relationships that would not otherwise be available in a traditional classroom setting (Ahmed et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2014).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are limitations to the present study that should be considered for future research. The use of extant data from a previous research resulted in the analysis of answers to prompts that were not formulated to specifically reflect relational movement through the participants' experience. Future research specifically addressing the premises and value of RCT in multicultural competence development through immersion experience should be conducted. Due to time constraints during the analysis, a single round of coding with only one set of coders took place. Reproducing the study with multiple coding sessions and separate coding groups could produce more meaningful results that would help identify further tenets of RCT that were not explored. The limited number of participants can also be considered a limitation; however, the number of counselor education students participating in study abroad programs that are specifically developed for counseling education is low, limiting the opportunities to conduct qualitative studies with a higher sample size. Collaborative projects using the present research as a pilot study may help gather more data with a larger number of participants. In addition, language barriers and lack of Spanish proficiency may also be considered a limitation of

the study. Cultural immersion to countries with the same language as the group traveling or requiring a conversational level of the language of the country that the students will be visiting may result in deeper experience and richer data. However, it is important to consider that several of the realizations, insights, and evidence of change in the participants are related to them experiencing those language barriers and the contact with a culture that is very different from their own.

Future research assessing differences between immersion experiences conducted in cultures with different levels of similarities may be valuable. In addition, further research concerning development in multicultural competency may include comparing the effectiveness and level of development for domestic immersion experiences to international cultural immersion experiences. Researching the extent of development using RCT and a separate model of cultural development, comparing the two theories to evaluate the most effective method for determining multicultural competency, would make for stronger implications of the results. The cultural immersion experience in Honduras was conducted over 13 days; comparison research looking at other study abroad programs with different lengths could help to develop multicultural education programs using immersion that had specific time frames to maximize effectiveness.

Implications for Counselor Education Programs

The need for counselor education students to be prepared to work with diverse populations is clearly cited in the literature (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002), as it is the responsibility of training programs to prepare culturally-competent professionals to serve the needs of diverse clients (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2016). Counselor education programs should consider incorporating experiential learning opportunities, such as study abroad programs, to promote the development of counselor education students (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Johnson & Lambie, 2013).

Jaoko (2010) emphasizes that study abroad programs must be well designed to impact student development. In this study one area that was not identified through the RCT model during the analysis that emerged as also important to the development of the participants was preparation for the experience. The preparation taken by two of the participants to get ready for their experience was noted as significant by two of the coders. Preparation may be indicative of participants demonstrating more openness early in the process and may have an impact on their multicultural competence development process. Counselor education programs should give especial attention to the student preparation and pre-departure orientation prior to participation in a study abroad program.

Because international travel is often costly, it would be useful for counselor education programs to explore ways to develop domestic cultural immersion experiences or other alternative strategies, that take students out of their comfort zones while providing them with opportunities to connect in meaningful ways with individuals who are culturally different than themselves. Programs that are shorter and less expensive, while still effective in aiding cultural competence development, could be highly useful in

promoting the multicultural competence development of counselor education students.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the multicultural competence development, as explained by RCT, of eight counselor education students who participated in a study abroad program to Honduras. Through journaling, students shared first impressions, self-reflections, and take on various program activities that provided an inside look of their lived experience. After analyzing the data through the RCT framework, findings suggest that there is evidence of cultural competence development of the students. Themes that emerged from the data correspond to the RCT tenants including: (a) relational movement, (b) disconnections, (c) relational images, and (d) mutual empathy providing evidence of positive relational movement towards growth-fostering relationships and mutual empathy through the study abroad experience. Findings of the present study helped gain better understanding of the study abroad experience and the developmental process of counselor education students. Furthermore, the study provided an opportunity to utilize RCT as a framework in understanding the study abroad experience and the multicultural competence development of counselor education students. The findings in the present study demonstrate the need to incorporate experiential learning strategies, such as study abroad programs, into the counselor education curriculum to enhance multicultural competence development and global understanding.

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Appendix

Journal Entry Prompts

Journal entries for the following prompts were analyzed for this study.

- 1) Journal One (Completed during the pre-departure orientation): “Reflect about your expectations and goals for this experience. How do you expect this experience to be, how are you preparing for it and what do you plan to achieve?”
 - 2) Journal Two (Completed upon arrival in Honduras): “Take your time to reflect on all your experiences on this first day of our adventure. Talk about your emotions, thoughts, and cultural differences in your journey, and describe your first impressions of Honduras.”
 - 3) Journal Three (Completed on day seven of the program): “We have experienced a lot in a very short time. Please write yourself a letter overviewing (in as much detail as might be helpful to you and in your own style) the experiences we've had/your personal experiences. What have some of your highlights been? What are some key things you have learned about yourself? What are some impacts on your personal and/or professional development?”
 - 4) Journal Four (Completed upon return to the U.S.): “Reflect upon your experience addressing your multicultural awareness, knowledge, and how these will improve your multicultural competence. How will this awareness and knowledge influence your skills? What will you do to build on your knowledge in practice?”
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