Multicultural Course Pedagogy: Experiences of Master’s-Level Students of Color

Derek Xavier Seward

The author conducted a grounded theory study to examine multicultural training as experienced by 20 master’s-level students of color enrolled in multicultural counseling courses. Findings revealed an emergent theory of student of color learning experiences and multicultural course pedagogy. Implications for counselor educators are discussed.

Keywords: students of color, multicultural training, pedagogy, counselor education

Multicultural training literature is replete with information to help educators design and implement a curriculum that promotes student cultural competence. Conceptual models exist to guide counselor education programs in designing multicultural training (e.g., Buckley & Foldy, 2010; Fouad & Arredondo, 2007), and researchers have examined the effects of a variety of pedagogical strategies on student multicultural counseling competence development (e.g., Rapisarda, Jencius, & McGlothlin, 2011). Despite these contributions to the understanding of multicultural counselor education, relatively little attention has been paid to the pedagogical strategies used in multicultural training courses related to enhancing multicultural competence in students of color (Chao, Wei, Good, & Flores, 2011; Shorter-Gooden, 2009), defined here as individuals who identify as Asian, Black, Latino, multiracial, or Native American.

Historically, multicultural counseling courses have focused on preparing White students to work with a culturally diverse clientele (Shorter-Gooden, 2009). Pedagogical practices that may have reflected styles of teaching mainly to White students include facilitating discussions that exclude, silence, or single out students of color (Gay, 2004) and preventing or ignoring conflict within the classroom, which can maintain aspects of White privilege (Blackwell, 2010). Earlier in the profession’s history, when most counseling services were provided overwhelmingly by White counselors, it was understandable to have a White, Eurocentric-oriented training focus (Sue & Sue, 2013). Because of their dominant sociocultural positionality, White students were viewed as culturally encapsulated and in need of training to promote their cultural awareness and appreciation for cultural diversity (Shorter-Gooden, 2009). In contrast, students of color were assumed to be culturally advanced

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and thus not requiring as much attention to address cultural biases (Sue & Sue, 2013). Paradoxically, this assumption may marginalize students of color.

Without research examining the experiences of students of color, students of color may not benefit fully from training. Moreover, if counseling programs adhere to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2009) Standards to attract diverse students, programs must ensure that the multicultural preparation of those students is not overlooked. Inattention to training students of color amounts to a structure of neglect operating within training programs that is in direct conflict with counseling professional values of equity and social justice. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of master’s-level students of color enrolled in multicultural counseling courses to understand the perceived impact of multicultural pedagogy on student learning. Also, I sought to identify racial differences among students of color regarding their pedagogical experiences.

Critical Race Theory (CRT): A Theoretical Rationale for Valuing Student Views

In this study, CRT is applied as a conceptual foundation for exploring student of color perspectives regarding multicultural pedagogy. Described as “a race-conscious approach to understanding educational inequality and identifying potential solutions” (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011, p. 2), CRT emphasizes the inclusion and valuing of racially marginalized perspectives so that these viewpoints can identify possible racial inequalities. On the basis of their lived racial experiences, students of color are perceived in CRT to be possessors of unique knowledge that can provide a critique of dominant racial discourses (Zamudio et al., 2011). Therefore, CRT provides an interpretative frame through which student perspectives can offer a critique of multicultural training.

Using CRT as an interpretative framework acknowledges that student perceptions and experiences will be affected by personal worldviews. Defined as a person’s beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world, worldview is influenced not only by race and ethnicity but also by other cultural influences (Sue & Sue, 2013). Although it is assumed that members of a cultural group have some shared experiences and perspectives, idiosyncratic and developmental differences among individuals can also contribute to differing viewpoints with any cultural group on matters of importance. CRT principles reject notions of homogeneity between and within racial groups.

For instance, racial identity development theory recognizes that members of the same racial group may share a common ancestry or have similar life experiences yet possess differing opinions, beliefs, and attitudes (Buckley & Foldy, 2010). Racial identity relates to a person’s feelings, thoughts, and behavior regarding self, fellow racial group members, and members of other racial groups (Sue & Sue, 2013). Depending on the individual, a student’s racial identity development receptivity to engaging in cultural learning could vary greatly (Buckley & Foldy, 2010).
Finally, it must be noted that students’ training perceptions can also be affected by the racial climate of their programs and institutions. Although racial climate can refer to the overall racial ambiance of an educational setting, components of a racial climate may include the numerical representation of students of color as well as perceptions of racism and marginalization within specific academic programs and the larger institution (Gay, 2004). Studies on racial climate, particularly at predominantly White institutions, often describe students of color as feeling isolated, alienated, and disconnected from White peers, faculty, and institutions (Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004). This is considered to be a result of experiencing racial marginalization in their learning environments. The consequences of marginalization can negatively affect academic success, psychological well-being, and the integration of students into their programs and institutions (Gay, 2004; Lopez, 2005).

Student of Color Perspectives Represented in Multicultural Training Research

Research on master’s-level student of color experiences in multicultural training is slight (Chao et al., 2011; Shorter-Goeden, 2009). Dickson, Argus-Calvo, and Tafoya (2010), in a study with a predominantly Latino student sample (93.3%), noted increased self-perceived multicultural competence after multicultural training. Furthermore, qualitative data indicated that students identified positive changes primarily in their self-awareness of biases and racial identity, awareness of cultural issues, and knowledge of cultural groups. Students attributed these changes to self-reflective assignments (e.g., journals, papers), participatory activities (e.g., experiential exercises, class discussions), and traditional assignments (e.g., reading, research), respectively.

Researchers in two studies explored aspects of master’s- and doctoral-level students’ multicultural training experiences using a critical incidents approach in which participants of various racial backgrounds responded to questions about meaningful training experiences that students believed positively affected their cultural development. In the first study, Coleman (2006) identified that didactic and experiential course work was pertinent to cultural growth for students of color, whereas cross-cultural interaction during class discussions and assignments was most important to White students’ learning. In the second study, Sammons and Speight (2008) found that students of all races reported increased knowledge, self-awareness, and attitudinal and behavioral changes in their multicultural courses. Participants attributed these changes to interactive activities, didactic activities, their course as a whole, instructor influence, and reflective activities. However, no racial differences were reported in personal change or attributes of change. Findings from Sammons and Speight (2008) and Coleman (2006) may be relevant to master’s-level students of color, but it is difficult to extrapolate from the findings because doctoral students composed the majority of each study’s participant sample.

Although the studies by Sammons and Speight (2008) and Coleman (2006) identified current multicultural training pedagogy as meaningful for students
of color, little is known about exactly what contributes to the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies for these students. Moreover, neither study examined whether aspects of the students’ training were perceived as ineffective, detrimental, or innocuous to their cultural development. Additionally, the studies did not consider heterogeneity among students of color.

Method
I selected a grounded theory tradition (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to investigate the experiences of students of color enrolled in multicultural counseling courses. Grounded theory is an inductive methodology that allows for theory generation based on themes that emerge from participants rather than researcher-developed hypotheses (Fassinger, 2005). Grounded theory was selected because it creates a space for racially marginalized voices to be respected as valued sources of knowledge—consistent with CRT—to reform multicultural counselor training through the generation of theory rooted in student perspectives (Fassinger, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). To that end, two primary research questions guided the present study:

Research Question 1: What do students of color perceive as important to their training in multicultural courses?
Research Question 2: To what extent do students perceive that their multicultural training course addresses their educational needs?

Participants
I received permission to recruit participants from 12 of 29 chairpersons of counseling programs located in the northeastern United States. Students from five of the 12 counseling programs responded to flyers posted on counseling department bulletin boards, e-mail notifications forwarded to students by the chairpersons, or my in-person solicitation asking for volunteers. Criteria for selection included that students identified as Asian, Black, Latino, multiracial, or Native American and were currently enrolled in or had completed a multicultural counseling course. Participants were 20 master’s-level students of color. Most self-identified as Black (n = 12), with the remaining students indicating their race/ethnicity as Latino (n = 4), Asian (n = 2), and multiracial (n = 2). Students ranged in age from 23 to 44 years (M = 29, SD = 7.7), and most were female (n = 16). The majority of students were enrolled in mental health counseling programs (n = 15), followed by school counseling (n = 5) and dual school and mental health counseling programs (n = 2). Fifteen students were enrolled full time, four students were enrolled part time, and the enrollment status for one student was unknown.

At the time of recruitment, almost all the students were enrolled in a multicultural counseling course (n = 18). The remaining students completed their courses during the previous year. Eleven master’s-level multicultural counseling courses and eight course instructors are represented in the present study. Course enrollments ranged from 11 to 29 students (M = 22, SD
Eighteen students self-identified as racial/ethnic minorities in their multicultural counseling courses, with students reporting the total number of students of color in their multicultural courses, including themselves, as ranging from one to seven ($M = 4$, $SD = 2$) or 3.45% to 35% of their class populations. Two students did not provide information on the racial/ethnic makeup of their courses. Participants reported that almost all the instructors were female ($n = 7$) and held doctorates ($n = 6$); degree information was not provided for two instructors. Participants also reported the racial backgrounds of the instructors as White ($n = 5$), Black ($n = 1$), Asian ($n = 1$), and multiracial ($n = 1$).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection involved participants completing two interviews: (a) a focus group interview followed by an individual follow-up interview ($n = 9$), (b) two individual interviews ($n = 9$), or (c) an individual interview followed by a focus group interview ($n = 2$). Focus groups are particularly useful in data collection because they can (a) foster naturalistic communication among members, (b) allow members extended reflection time, and (c) allow for recall and refinement of experiences and beliefs based on hearing the perspectives of others (Finch & Lewis, 2003). The individual interview allowed for further depth and richness of students’ experiences. It became necessary to alter the interview sequence when students either (a) were the only participant from their institution or (b) volunteered to participate after focus groups had been conducted at their institution. The five focus groups (two to three participants each) were conducted in person at participants’ respective institutions. Individual interviews were conducted in person at participants’ institutions ($n = 17$) or via telephone ($n = 3$).

Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 60 minutes. As a Black male counselor educator, I facilitated all focus group and individual interviews. For the first interviews in each data collection sequence, I used a guided conversation interview protocol using two open-ended questions with probes to allow the participants to discuss issues relevant to them (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006): (a) “As a student of color, can you talk about what you perceive you need to learn in your multicultural training course(s)?” and (b) “Can you talk about how your class is doing, or did, in regard to meeting your educational interests and learning needs?”

After completing all the first interviews, I performed open and axial coding. I reviewed each sentence by asking sensitizing questions of the data, which include determining what is going on in the data (e.g., issues, problems, concerns), who is involved, and how the participants define the situation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Bogdan and Biklen (2006) noted that this examination process should produce families of codes that share some meaningful association but are broad enough to permit categories to be developed from each data group. Next, I developed a codebook composed of 11 categories, each including a definition, properties list, and selected code examples that could be used during code sorting. As coding continued,
I engaged in constant comparison, and as appropriate existing codes were recategorized, I created, relabeled, or redefined categories as incoming data dictated. Then, I explicited relationships among categories to identify key categories and develop working hypotheses about phenomena relevant to understanding student perspectives.

Consistent with grounded theory, the data collection process became increasingly focused during the second round of interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I began the second interview in each data collection sequence by reminding participants about the study’s purpose and asking participants if they wanted to discuss anything further from the first interview. Also, I targeted questions with probes toward the themes generated during the first round of interviews in an attempt to capture greater detail regarding participant experiences and to identify disconfirming evidence. Questions included the following: “Other students talked about [this phenomenon], but you did not. What was your experience, if at all, with [this phenomenon]?” and “You’re one of a few students to talk about [this phenomenon]. Can you say more about this experience?”

Data analysis for the second round of interviews included implementing the paradigm model (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to further identify patterns among key categories and refine working hypotheses in an effort to articulate a theory of students’ experiences. The paradigm model analysis involved (a) inquiring about the conditional structure of student experiences; (b) looking for routine responses to situations, events, or problems; and (c) examining consequences of actions. Also, I intentionally examined the data with a lens toward learning about how students discussed and related to course pedagogy. Specifically, I sought to understand what pedagogical strategies students referenced, their responses to the strategies, and the impact of the pedagogy on the students. Using the paradigm model, I identified and examined patterns among the key categories, resulting in a core category that captured central aspects of students’ experiences, including their perspectives on pedagogy. At this stage in the data collection and analysis process, data saturation was achieved (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

In total, data analysis resulted in 1,163 codes, 192 categories, six key categories, and one core category representing the central theme of student perspectives based on integration of all the key categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). No single key category fully captured student experiences. Also, no pattern was found in every key category. Therefore, each key category uniquely contributed an aspect to understanding student of color experiences in multicultural training courses, which is consistent with grounded theory core category generation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Additionally, the core category represents aggregated data from students of differing cultural backgrounds. The small number of participants from each race did not allow for comparisons across racial groups. However, within-racial-group analysis was conducted to determine the most frequently endorsed categories. For every category, I tallied the number of students from each racial/ethnic group whose perspectives were represented.
Because of their larger numerical representation, only Black and Latino groups were examined.

**Research Positionality and Study Trustworthiness**

Within qualitative methodology, investigators acknowledge their assumptions (Bogdan & Biklen 2006). I began the process by identifying assumptions about students of color in multicultural training courses. As a Black male counselor educator who frequently teaches multicultural counseling courses, I acknowledged the potential for students to receive little theoretical and practical counseling information from the perspective of a counseling student of color. Also, I perceived that current multicultural training strategies have the potential to positively affect student cultural development. I shared biases during peer debriefing meetings to explore how positionality could affect data collection, analysis, and presentation.

I implemented several strategies to increase study trustworthiness. First, I participated in weekly peer debriefing meetings with two researchers of color, both of whom had qualitative research experience with populations of color. They reviewed analytical memos, codes, coding procedures, and working hypotheses for potential biases, inconsistencies, or claims that were not fully supported by the data. As a result of their challenges to the data analysis, I engaged in a cyclic process of reexamining raw and coded data and discussed any new data understandings with the peer debriefers until consensus was reached. Second, I sought disconfirming evidence as a means of monitoring potential biases. Specifically, throughout data collection, I asked participants about instances that contradicted emerging themes. Also, as part of data analysis, I created subcategories that contained codes identified as contradictory to their parent category. The subcategories contained negative case data used in determining the relative strength and intensity of categories as described by Becker and Geer (1960). Third, I shared with participants, during their final interview, hypotheses related to key categories so that they could comment on the accuracy of the analysis, thereby providing a member check. Several participants provided examples to expand and illustrate the working hypotheses.

**Findings**

Consistent with grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), the data analysis resulted in a core category—learned from courses, but feeling unsatisfied—which was identified as the central narrative of students’ learning experiences in their multicultural counseling courses. Using Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) paradigm model, I present an emergent theory of student experiences of multicultural course pedagogy that begins with an articulation of the core category or phenomenon. This is followed by a discussion of causal conditions that influence that phenomenon; contextual conditions that frame the environment in which phenomena occur; intervening conditions that can alter the impact of the causal conditions on the phenomenon; action/interaction strategies that represent tactics individuals use to navigate situations; and consequences, which are outcomes of those chosen tactics.
Core Category: Learned From Courses, But Feeling Unsatisfied

During conversations about how well the courses were meeting their learning needs, students described not only satisfaction with being exposed to cultural beliefs and practices of diverse groups, but also dissatisfaction with the depth and breadth of their course content regarding cultural issues. These two primary aspects of the core category are discussed next.

**Learning about other cultural beliefs and practices.** As a primary educational benefit resulting from their multicultural courses, all students discussed their increased knowledge of diverse cultural worldviews and beliefs. Students realized that they had lacked information about the cultural values and perspectives of diverse cultures. Although some students spoke generally about their enhanced understanding, several students identified course content on individuals with disabilities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning communities; and spirituality as particularly worthwhile.

Talking about the impact of her multicultural course, a Black student discussed her learning about other marginalized populations:

> I think it has also opened my eyes to what other types of minorities are like that I may not have considered as far as people with disabilities, [and] gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered people as a minority group—which I don’t think until recently I viewed so much of them as a minority group.

**Unsatisfied with course breadth and depth.** Although all students described their courses as enhancing their multicultural competence, nearly all were still unsatisfied. The main reason for the students’ lack of fulfillment was that they experienced their courses as limited in scope, depth, and complexity. A Black student described her course as follows:

> It was broad. The professor touched on a lot of different cultures, different ways of living, and different traditions within cultures. But I think certain things were left out or glossed over. I think actual real-life interactions, actual past experiences of groups of people—entire groups—and the history that they may have went through, and just dealing with those populations in counseling.

To deepen their learning, students wanted their course readings and classroom discussions to move beyond such overviews of cultural groups and basic concepts (e.g., racism exists). Black students endorsed the sentiment more strongly, although students from all racial backgrounds expressed concerns related to course depth and complexity.

Causal Conditions: Perceptions of Multicultural Competence and Racial Climate

Students perceived themselves to have a foundation of multicultural knowledge and awareness, which they compared with that of classmates whom they were more likely to perceive as culturally encapsulated. Students reported experiencing isolation and alienation from some of those classmates, which affected their learning opportunities.
Perceptions of personal multicultural competence. Most students held keen interests in issues of diversity prior to taking the course. On the basis of their experiences as persons of color, they described themselves as arriving with “real-world” cultural acuity. A Black student explained, “I guess it’s hard to teach multicultural students to be multicultural because it’s something you grew up with and it’s something that you automatically do.” In addition, many students were relatively well read on theory and research related to diversity. Speaking about her class experience, a multiracial student explained, “It’s kind of redundant. I guess it’s just things I’ve been learning my whole life through books.”

Perceptions of peers’ multicultural competence. Nearly all students considered many of their peers to be culturally encapsulated or lacking in cultural knowledge regarding the lifestyles of marginalized racial groups and basic cultural concepts, such as assimilation.

In comparison with classmates of color, students tended to view their White peers as not possessing accurate information regarding the lifestyles of people of color. A Black student succinctly articulated this perspective, stating, “I mean we [students of color] are already sensitive to other races. It’s White people who aren’t.” Speaking about his classmates, a Latino student expressed his struggle to understand their lack of multicultural awareness and knowledge: “I just can’t believe that certain people have never heard these terms because it’s something that I use on a daily basis when I go home. . . . It’s just I feel bad for them ’cause they’ve been so closed off.”

Classroom racial climate. Nearly all students described struggling with feelings of alienation, isolation, and being misunderstood in their courses. A Black student explained, “I find myself isolated a lot. A lot of the things I’ve experienced and shared with the class no one else has felt.” Some students described being stereotyped, as this student explained: “I felt I was labeled as being the angry Black woman.” Other students felt that their classmates viewed them as tokens. A Latina student stated, “There may be people [classmates] who think she [referring to herself] doesn’t have to be all that smart because we got to have somebody in the program who’s a minority.” Students reported that classmates’ perceptions of them affected the quality of classroom discussions and their learning, as this Black student explained:

I just really wanted to know what they [classmates] were thinking. I kind of felt that it held us back. It held me back because I was interested knowing what the other cultures thought about my culture. And it held them back because if they weren’t gonna be honest about . . . express what they were really thinking and feeling . . . how are they going to grow in that area if they’re just gonna stay, you know, on the surface with it?

Contextual Conditions: Course Focus and Content

The majority of students mentioned feeling frustrated when multicultural course content overwhelmingly focused on issues revolving around societally nondominant groups, such as people of color. For these students, their instructors seemed to position members of their racial group and other people of color as primary objects for study rather than potential consumers of
knowledge, as this Black student pointed out: “That whole course is geared toward teaching White students how to deal with minority cultures. That’s really what the multicultural course is about, and that’s my problem with it.”

Specifically, five students indicated that they were not familiar with the nuances inherent in various White cultural beliefs and practices. As this Black student explained, they had hoped to gain increased knowledge and understanding about White cultural beliefs and practices to be equipped to counsel White clients:

I asked [the instructor], “We’re studying everybody else. Why we’re not studying White people?” I’d like to know why they do a lot of stuff they do. But nobody’s giving us that information. You know that’s not in a textbook. . . . So are we just supposed to innately know how they function?

Another concern of the course was that the content was not always reflective of real-world diversity issues. As a result, students were captious of textbook information perceived to present stereotypical views of people. Nine students felt that their textbooks presented shallow or inaccurate information about values and lifestyles of their racial group and other cultural populations, as this multiracial student explained: “A lot of the readings tend to format to the stereotypical information that you learn about people, and I don’t think they’re true. They’re personal experience, and they’re very general.” Therefore, students appeared to believe that some authors lacked personal insights into the cultural groups about which they wrote. In explaining how reading literature from an author of color about her cultural group would affect her, a Black student said, “It would have been more believable to me.”

Intervening Conditions: Instructors and Pedagogical Strategies

Students perceived their multicultural course instructors as crucial to their learning experiences. Their instructors’ ability to present themselves as knowledgeable about diversity issues from personal experiences or to select meaningful pedagogical strategies appeared to affect student classroom experiences.

Credibility of instructors. More than half of the students expected their instructors to demonstrate real-world knowledge of diversity and contrasted this to their experiences with some instructors of other courses. One multiracial student noted,

Some of my other professors, I don’t feel like they have a real-world handle on topics. So a lot of things they might say go in one ear and out the other. I don’t really take notes in the class. I’m just kind of listening. But with her, I feel like she has the experience. So my ears perk up.

Often, real-world knowledge meant that the instructor was a person of color who had experienced discrimination. This is not to say that students summarily dismissed all White instructors as incompetent to teach the class. In fact, there were several examples shared of White instructors whom students valued because of their ability to share personal experiences of discrimination. It is
interesting that, although students from all racial backgrounds mentioned that credibility of the instructor affected if and how they participated, Latino students voiced this sentiment more than did students from other racial groups.

**Pedagogical strategies.** All students discussed pedagogical strategies they believed enhanced their understanding of culturally diverse others; however, three strategies were identified as particularly beneficial: classroom discussions, guest speakers, and in-class presentations. Through class discussions, students described gaining insight into their peers’ cultural identities and worldviews. Listening to the life histories of their peers provided a glimpse into how someone of a different background develops culturally. Explaining her appreciation for classmates openly talking about their cultural experiences and beliefs, a Black student said,

I’ll be, “Oh, wow, thank you for sharing,” because I understand more of their personality. I understand the experiences that they’ve gone through and how that experience has shaped who they are and why they believe the way they do.

Similarly, nearly all students considered the unique value of dialoguing with peers about cultural identities and histories and thus expanding their cultural consciousness. One Latina student explained, “I think that it has been very helpful to hear other people’s experiences and, to be quite honest, even to watch some of the struggles as they think of themselves as possibly belonging to a racist society.”

Several students mentioned guest speakers as beneficial to improving their understanding of societal oppression endured by persons other than people of color. The authenticity and passion from which speakers talked about their lives resonated with students. One Latina student explained the impact of two guest speakers with disabilities on her learning this way: “I didn’t understand things from their point of view until they spoke about the discrimination they face.”

Additionally, students mentioned that in-class presentations led by classmates on cultural populations were beneficial to their learning. Several students stated that their courses offered too few readings that delved into specific values and beliefs associated with different cultural groups. Classroom presentations provided students with an opportunity to go beyond surface-level similarities and differences within and among cultural groups. In explaining why she liked student presentations, one multiracial student stated,

I do like the presentations. I actually got a lot out of the Asian American one, because there was a lot of stuff that . . . I guess I always assumed because I’m a minority that I know everything about any other minority ’cause we’re kinda the same, but we’re really not.

**Action/Interaction Strategies: Variation in Class Participation**

All students described experiencing tensions about deciding whether and how much to participate in their multicultural counseling courses. Students described instances when they felt the need to speak out in class to protect or advocate for people of color and other instances when advocacy took the
form of silence or a lack of participation in class. Similarly, there were also instances when students’ level of involvement was decided on the basis of their own needs as students and future professionals.

*Deciding to protect/advocate for people of color.* Students described monitoring their class contributions to make sure that they represented people of color well. A Latina student explained the pressure she experienced to regulate her in-class contributions, stating,

I really work very hard in making sure that I’m on my best behavior. I’m the one educated person that they’re going to run into. So the truth is that I feel like that I’m sociable, and I try hard to not talk too much, to not talk too little. I don’t want them to think, “Oh, she’s a quiet little Hispanic woman,” either.

Students also carefully monitored their participation for fear of reifying negative stereotypes related to their racial group. However, student sensitivities to avoid being stereotyped were contrasted with a need to speak up to address limitations they found in class discussions and readings, as this Black student explained: “You feel you have to make sure people don’t just learn from the news or media.”

Contrary to speaking up in class, students also described instances when being silent and less forthcoming served as a way of protecting and advocating for people of color. After hearing classmates discuss stereotypes about Native Americans, one Black student described changing her class participation regarding Black cultural beliefs and practices: “It made me shut down about the Black experience because I don’t believe everybody seeking information about a particular group of people will use it to enhance that group that they’re inquiring about.”

*Deciding to protect/advocate for self.* Students also described making in-class participation decisions based on a need to protect and advocate for themselves. Alienation and isolation within their classrooms were a concern, as described by this multiracial student:

It’s daunting to kind of have to be different all the time. Sometimes you just don’t want to be different, but you know trying to hold true to who you are, you just stay quiet about things because you just can’t, you don’t want to deal with that.

Additionally, students discussed staying silent when they perceived a lack of support from peers or their professor or when their personal sharing would have little influence on their classmates’ development of pluralistic thinking. Being silent also allowed the perspectives of other students to emerge, which half of the students felt enhanced their own learning. An Asian student explained, “So I think it’s good to learn from them [classmates] and their culture and how I can apply that understanding to my clients.” Finally, two students stated that they refrained from speaking in class to avoid aligning themselves with perspectives of classmates of color. A Latina student explained her response to in-class statements by a Latino classmate: “Well I did agree with him on some things, but other things it’s, like, ‘No, I don’t really agree on that.’ Or I just wouldn’t say anything.”
Consequences: Obligation and Withdrawal

As a result of experiencing participation tensions, students described consequences of withdrawing from the learning process, but also instances of feeling satisfied that they fulfilled personal expectations to represent their racial group well.

*Fulfilling an obligation.* Tensions experienced by students regarding participation provided them with opportunities to fulfill personal obligations to their racial groups. A Black student explained his sense of responsibility as a numerical minority within his classroom: “I had to speak up for African American men, which is an obligation that a lot of African Americans feel whenever they’re in a situation where you’re the only one or very few.” When being silent in class, students also expressed having a duty to their racial group, as this Black student explained: “I have a real problem with disclosing too much information about Black people. I don’t think you need to know all our business.” There was sense of satisfaction students experienced in representing their racial groups well. A Black student stated, “But I like it. . . . I don’t like to be the example for all Black people, but I like to give them [classmates] some type of window into what it’s like, the life of a Black student.”

Not all instances of satisfaction revolved around fulfilling an obligation to students’ racial groups. Several students described a duty to help classmates increase their multicultural knowledge and awareness that provided satisfaction. When participating in class discussion, a multiracial student stated, “What I like to do is really just throw out there alternatives about it [a diversity topic].” This student later explained that her participation rationale was “just to have people have a more diverse learning experience.” Similarly, one Asian student described sharing her life experiences in class for the sake of classmates’ learning: “You don’t do these things to get something out of it. . . . [It’s] kind of like a fiduciary duty, you know, to help others gain their awareness.”

*Withdrawing from the learning process.* Another consequence of students’ participation tensions involved students distancing themselves from the classroom learning process. For 11 students, this meant intellectually withdrawing from their multicultural courses. A Latina student spoke about completing her multicultural course work in an inauthentic manner: “I wanted to get a good grade, and I knew that discussing about stuff personally was what she [the professor] wanted in the papers . . . just kind of a pretend kind of thing so I wouldn’t get a bad grade.” Similarly, a Black student spoke about “holding back” her real perspectives on class assignments to ensure that she received a good grade:

They [textbooks and the professor] say if a Black person came into counseling, you would have to treat this person *this way*, and it might not be actually what I feel, or necessarily what I would do, but this is the way I would tell you because this is the grade I wanted to get. I need to pass.

Additionally, nine of the 11 students talked about putting in minimal effort into their multicultural classes. For instance, a Latina student stated, “So I
did the bare minimum for that class, and then I got the bare minimum of a grade.”

Discussion

The present study uniquely contributes to the extant multicultural training literature by presenting an emergent theory of student of color learning experiences and multicultural counseling course pedagogy. Students described key experiences of alienation and isolation, along with their perceptions of their multicultural competence in contrast to their classmates’ competence levels, as affecting their approach to learning. Within the classroom environment, students reported that opportunities existed for them to learn and expand their multicultural knowledge and awareness; however, students also indicated that opportunities for learning about cultural topics of specific interest to them lacked depth and complexity or went unaddressed. From their perspectives, learning experiences could be altered by their instructors’ ability to demonstrate a real-world understanding of cultural issues or by selecting pedagogical strategies that facilitated in-depth exploration of cultural issues and populations. To manage their experiences, students described engaging in a decisional process about how much to participate in their multicultural counseling courses and how. As a result of their participation, or lack thereof, students perceived opportunities to fulfill duties as persons of color to protect and advocate for their racial groups or intellectually withdraw from the learning process. Ultimately, students endorsed that their multicultural courses enhanced their multicultural development. That being said, study findings also point to students’ lack of fulfillment with pedagogical strategies that provided rudimentary introductions to cultural issues with little attention to cultural nuances and complexities.

Worldview seemed to be a key factor in understanding how students of color experienced their course pedagogy. Students perceived themselves as already knowledgeable about rudimentary diversity concepts covered in their courses, such as oppression endured by populations of color. Researchers have found that students of color self-report, and have been rated by third parties, as having higher levels of multicultural competence than their counterparts (Chao et al., 2011; Constantine, 2001). Data from the current study suggest that students’ self-perceived higher levels of cultural competence influenced their affinity for pedagogical strategies that included classroom dialogue and deeper examination of the cultural beliefs and practices of diverse groups. Students operating from a higher racial and cultural identity stage may be receptive to more challenging conversations about cultural issues in ways that contribute to furthering their cultural development (Buckley & Foldy, 2010). For some students, however, their self-perceived higher level of competence contributed to their disappointment and limited increase in knowledge, particularly when course pedagogy failed to delve into diversity concepts and cultural populations beyond their precourse comprehension levels. Although previous studies have identified participatory activities (e.g., classroom discussions, role plays; Coleman, 2006; Dickson et al., 2010; Sammons & Speight, ...
2008) as key pedagogical mechanisms instrumental in enhancing cultural competence for students of color, findings from the present study suggest that students’ racial and cultural identity levels, as well as the depth at which these pedagogies delve, can influence, and in some cases dictate, their impact.

Results also suggest that the racial climate within students’ multicultural training classrooms affected their pedagogical experiences. In the present study, nearly all students described struggling with feelings of alienation, isolation, and being misunderstood, which is common among students of color in predominantly White educational situations (Gay, 2004). For students who believed that their multicultural courses were generally designed to teach White students to be culturally competent, their disappointment could be a reaction to teaching approaches that are unintentionally oriented to developing consciousness about White racism and other cultural oppressions in White students. According to Blackwell (2010), teaching approaches that focus course content and ways of learning toward dominant students can be experienced as marginalizing by students whose cultural values and worldviews differ from those of majority students. In the present study, some students expressed concern that their courses positioned them as members of cultural groups to be studied, but not as learners.

Students’ race also seemed relevant to understanding how they experienced multicultural course pedagogy. For instance, Black students primarily described feeling unfulfilled in their courses because of perceptions that course pedagogy was suited for individuals at lower levels of cultural competence than themselves. Meanwhile, Latino students primarily expressed reactions to pedagogy based on their assessments of how credible and authentic course content and instruction appeared. These findings are congruent with previous research that has found that between-race dynamics can influence student of color experiences in predominantly White educational settings (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002).

Previous researchers have found that instructors can be a catalyst for student development within multicultural training courses. Sammons and Speight (2008) noted that students, both White and those of color, primarily indicated that instructor influence had positive effects on their cultural development. In contrast, students in the present study, particularly those who believed that their multicultural courses were generally designed to teach White students to be culturally competent, experienced several instructor-determined pedagogical strategies as ineffective. For instance, instructor self-disclosure is considered a beneficial strategy in helping students feel comfortable with the often difficult process of cultural self-exploration (Lee, Blando, Mizelle, & Orozco, 2007). However, in the present study, some students of color evaluated their instructors’ self-disclosures and teaching style to determine whether the instructors possessed any personal, real-world experiences of marginalization. In part, students’ focus on instructor real-world credibility could be a way to assess the psychological safety of the classroom. As a survival technique in a racially oppressive society, some students of color have been socialized to be suspicious of majority-group members and those...
in authority (Buckley & Foldy, 2010; Shorter-Gooden, 2009). Moreover, as numerical minorities in their classrooms, students of color could have been evaluating their instructors to determine whether they were likely to receive instructor support if they shared perspectives or values that differed from those of their classmates or readings. On the basis of their assessment of safety, students’ participation decisions could be affected.

**Implications**

Results of the present study indicate that students of color may enhance their multicultural competence when pedagogical strategies examine cultural populations and issues in a complex way. When designing their multicultural courses, counselor educators can identify course content and pedagogical strategies that consider how cultural aspects, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and social class, intersect to influence diversity among members of the same cultural group. Class discussions can provide students with an opportunity to hear differing cultural beliefs and perspectives, while valuing other students as sources of information who, by sharing their firsthand and academic knowledge, can add complexity to how cultural groups are understood (White, 2011). Inviting guest speakers who are members of the cultural groups being studied may also be beneficial. Moreover, inclusion of written materials from members of the cultural groups being studied or recognized experts who would have a highly nuanced cultural understanding can help provide diverse perspectives of cultural groups (Buckley & Foldy, 2010).

Additionally, results suggest that counselor educators must improve the racial climate of their classrooms and programs. With the majority of students of color expressing feelings of alienation and isolation, counselor educators should examine course pedagogy and teaching approaches to ascertain whether the learning interests and needs of students of color are being subjugated. Multicultural courses should include content on diverse cultural groups, including White populations. Examination of dominant cultural subgroups along with marginalized populations may help to reduce student feelings of marginalization because there is equity in terms of populations being studied. It will also give all students a richer educational experience.

Results of the present study also indicate that counselor educators need to consider students’ worldviews when designing and facilitating multicultural courses. According to Fier and Ramsey (2005), educators must adjust their monocultural teaching approaches in recognition that students of differing cultural backgrounds and identity levels will have varied ways they conceptualize and respond to ideas and class activities and ways they frame their learning. Educators can include course content, readings, assignments, and evaluations that are sensitive to diverse worldviews. Additionally, a range of instructional methods can be used to engage students in the learning process, including lectures, experiential exercises, role plays, class discussion, live cultural demonstrations, and journaling. Educators are encouraged to use racial and cultural identity theories as a framework to recognize how students are relating to course material and the classroom environment.
Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations to the present qualitative study should be considered. First, the study sample represents a small group of students in multicultural counseling courses; therefore, transfer of findings to students of color in other training situations may be limited. The present research reflects student perspectives from predominantly White institutions. Future research should also be conducted with students from majority–minority programs (i.e., programs primarily composed of racial/ethnic minorities). Second, participants were not chosen at random, but represented students who volunteered to participate. Third, students of color were not represented equally across racial groups. More research is needed that includes larger, more diverse samples to explore within- and between-racial-group perspectives. Fourth, variations in the data collection could influence what students disclosed about their training experiences. Finally, the present study is limited in understanding student multicultural development through the use of self-report. It is possible for students to dislike a course aspect but still grow culturally from the experience. Future empirical investigations of multicultural course pedagogy should include subjective and objective assessments of student learning and cultural growth. Counselor educators must continue their challenging work of designing, implementing, and evaluating multicultural pedagogy to help all students enhance their cultural competence.

References


