Queer Theory as Pedagogy in Counselor Education: A Framework for Diversity Training

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There is an ongoing and pernicious debate within the field of counselor education surrounding the question of whether lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues should be included under the umbrella of multiculturalism. Some argue that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender concerns do not fit within the traditional framework of multicultural counseling, while others assert that they do. A consequence of this debate is that many graduate-level counselors are earning degrees without having sufficient levels of self-awareness and knowledge regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. The authors propose queer theory as a unifying framework for diversity training within counselor education programs.

KEYWORDS counselor education, queer theory, pedagogy

Freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation is surely a fundamental human right in any great democracy, as much as freedom from racial, religious, gender, or ethnic discrimination.

—Coretta Scott King

INTRODUCTION

The counseling profession is in the midst of a debate as to the scope of the definition of multiculturalism (Israel & Selvidge, 2003; Pope, 1995). The
dividing issue is whether or not to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals under the umbrella of multiculturalism. One negative aspect of this ongoing deliberation is that many counselors do not have a sufficient level of self-awareness and knowledge regarding the LGBT communities (Sherry, Whilde, & Patton, 2005). In fact, the majority of counseling trainees and professionals have received little or no training about LGBT issues (Israel & Hackett, 2004; Kocarek & Pelling, 2003; Phillips & Fischer, 1998). Preparing counselors who are competent to work with clients of varying identity categories is clearly an ethical imperative, as the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2005) specifically states, counselors do not discriminate "based on age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race, religion/spirituality, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status/partnership, language preference, socioeconomic status, or any basis proscribed by law" (C.5). Sexual orientation is also implicitly included in the ACA Code of Ethics, which states that counselors must be respectful of differences while being aware of and avoiding imposing their personal values on clients (A.4.b); must practice only within their competencies while continuing to gain knowledge and expand personal awareness, sensitivity, and skills pertinent to working with a diverse population (C.2.a); recognize the impact of the client's culture (E.5.b); and must be sensitive to diversity and research issues with special populations (G.1.g).

ACA also ethically charges its counselor educators to make an effort to "infuse material related to multiculturalism/diversity into all courses and workshops" (F.6.b), and calls on them to incorporate multicultural/diversity competence in counselor education and training programs (F.11.c). The Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, 2009) urges counselor educators to address LGBT issues in core courses and has developed a set of competencies, endorsed by ACA, to assist them in achieving this goal.

Competency in working with LGBT clients is important because the vast majority of mental health practitioners, regardless of their own sexual orientation, will work with LGBT clients during their careers (Bidell, 2005). Research has shown that when compared with heterosexual individuals, LGBT people are more than twice as likely to seek out counseling services (Greene, 2000; Grella, Greenwell, Mays, & Cochran, 2009). It is important to note that in addition to the issues that bring any person to seek counseling services (e.g., substance abuse, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, etc.), LGBT people have additional social stressors (e.g., discrimination, prejudice, rejection, stigmatization, threat of violence, etc.) to contend with on a daily basis (Meyer, 2003). Regardless of the reason for seeking counseling services, every client deserves a culturally competent counselor.
While significant numbers of LGBT individuals seek professional counseling services, approximately 50% report dissatisfaction with the services they receive, mainly due to the counselor's lack of professional conduct (Liddle, 1996; Palma & Stanley, 2002). Specifically noted are counselors' negative, prejudicial attitudes toward and lack of understanding of LGBT issues as well as perceived heterosexist bias (Phillips & Fischer, 1998). Researchers (e.g., Biaggio, Orchard, Larson, Petrino, & Mihara, 2003) have emphasized the lack of competent counselor training in LGBT issues as a major underlying source of LGBT clients' dissatisfaction with counselors' competency.

The crux of the problem is not that LGBT people are more likely to seek mental health services; it is that many counselor education programs do not train counselors to effectively work with issues relevant to sexual minority clients (Bieschke, Eberz, Bard, & Croteau, 1998; Sherry et al., 2005). In their study of 104 counseling and clinical psychology programs, Sherry and colleagues found that 67.6% of the programs had a required multicultural counseling class, 61% also had an advanced multicultural counseling class, and 71% of these courses covered LGBT issues. However, only 17% of the programs indicated that LGBT issues were incorporated into annual or end-of-program evaluations for students. In addition, only 21% of respondents indicated that LGBT issues were integrated into other courses that were not specifically multicultural courses. As a result of this lack of training, graduates often reported feeling incompetent to work with sexual minority clients.

Research on practicing counselor and therapist attitudes and behaviors toward LGBT clients mirrors the research that has been conducted with graduate student counselors (Rainey & Trusty, 2007). Eliason (2000) examined substance abuse counselors' attitudes and knowledge regarding LGBT clients and found that 44% of the respondents reported ambivalent or negative attitudes. Doherty and Simmons (1996) found that only slightly more than 50% of their respondents believed that they were competent to counsel same-sex couples. These findings may even underestimate the bias and prejudice present in counselors and counselor trainees since respondents in studies that use self-report measures to assess sensitive social issues are inclined to present themselves in a favorable light (Schmitt et al., 2003).

Counselors hold considerable power and influence over their clients, and their attitudes may significantly impact the counseling experience. It is understood that the role of the counselor is to provide an interactive process in which clients may express their unique experiences in an environment of genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007). While this is certainly true, it is also essential that counselors "understand aspects of diversity or difference in their clients and accept each client as a unique human being rather than as stereotypes of some group" (Eliason, 2000, p. 311).
Counselor Education and LGBT Sexualities

While counselor-training programs have begun to acknowledge the needs of diverse clients and students, recognition of the specific issues that impact LGBT clients and students are frequently omitted or ignored (Cannon, 2008; Eliaison, 2000; Johnson, 2006). One possible explanation for this exclusion is the belief by some that LGBT people are not members of a cultural minority group. According to Pope (1995), the LGBT community is a distinct cultural minority as well as being a sexual minority. Pope (1995) continues by saying that cultural minority status is given to any group that is a minority within a majority culture and that has its “own geographical living areas, economic and social organizations, cultural traditions, and rituals” (p. 73).

Providing affirmative education about sexual minorities has presented a challenge for many counselor educators, specifically those who hold traditional, conservative values or have had little exposure to LGBT people. Even those who intellectually accept LGBT people may emotionally reject same-sex relationships or individuals who do not conform to established gender norms (Corey et al., 2007). Unless counselor educators become aware of and challenge their faulty assumptions and homophobia (Logan, 1996), they risk projecting their misconceptions and fears onto their students (Logan & Barret, 2005).

Another professed rationale for the exclusion of LGBT issues in counselor education is that the educator may hold a personal value system that opposes the concept of homosexuality. Pederson (1991a) addressed this issue of value judgments:

One advantage to the term multiculturalism is that it implies a wide range of multiple groups without grading, comparing, or making them as better or worse than one another and without denying the very distinct and complementary or even contradictory perspectives that each group brings with it. (p. 4)

Pederson (1991b) also argued “the broad definition of culture is particularly important in preparing counselors to deal with the complex differences among clients from or between every cultural group” (p. 7).

The organizational climate of the institution in which the counselor training program is located may be another factor that influences whether diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions are included in or excluded from the class discussions and readings (Bleschke & Matthews, 1996; Eldridge & Barnett, 1991). Pilkington and Cantor (1996) postulated that the climate within graduate mental health training programs perpetuates and contributes to this problem. The manner in which the program treats sexual orientation in the choice of textbooks, course coverage, clinical and research supervision, instructor comments, and the interaction between faculty and
administration all have an effect on the manner and degree to which LGBT topics are addressed.

Education, in general, is grounded in Western, patriarchal, able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexist assumptions (Eyre, 1993). The experiences of women, people of color, people with disabilities, gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual and transgender individuals have been traditionally ignored or discounted, which has effectively constructed them as the “other” (Eyre, 1993; Johnson, 2006). According to Sue and Sue (2007), although multicultural training is increasing, “most graduate programs continue to give [it] inadequate treatment due to the fact that when issues relevant to counseling minority groups are presented in class they are usually from the White Euro-American, middle-class perspective” (p. 12). Addressing multicultural issues in a single-class format is simply not adequate to address the multitude of cross-cultural challenges today's counselors face (Cannon, 2008).

Challenges for Counselor Educators

The need for multiculturally competent counselors has never been more compelling, and it is crucial that counselors are trained to think complexly, rather than categorically, about the many manifestations of culture that they will experience with their clients (Passinger & Richie, 1996). Such competency is particularly vital since research has shown that a client's perception of satisfaction with counseling services is significantly influenced by the counselor's level of multicultural counseling competency (Constantine, 2002). Therefore, a counselor's ability to work effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds necessitates training in areas of difference. However, because mental health professionals are predominately Caucasian and are trained by predominately Caucasian faculty members, programs must be revamped to include accurate and realistic multicultural content and experiences that generate sensitivity and appreciation of the history, current needs, strengths, and resources of minority communities (Sue & Sue, 2007).

The multicultural environment of a program goes well beyond the manner in which difference is defined or taught. The environment must also include an accurate assessment of the more subtle aspects of the culture and atmosphere of the learning environment both inside and outside of the classroom. The culture that has shaped academic institutions is relatively homogenous by class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender. This milieu can create a defensive learning environment that does not welcome a cultural ambience that is different from the academic status quo (Gloria & Pope-Davis, 1997).

Counselor educators who want to ensure that the teaching environment is affirmative to gay and lesbian issues and training need to be able to evaluate the manner in which the department and university are affirmative to
the inclusion of LGBT people (Bieschke et al., 1998). Furthermore, counselor educators should recognize that the profession often reflects the values of the dominant culture and has been referred to as “the handmaiden of the status quo” (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992, p. 479). Such a worldview means that the larger current political and social culture of our society is represented within programs and needs to be acknowledged and addressed if an affirmative environment is to be fostered.

The more multiculturally aware and sensitive counselor training programs and departments become, the more effective they become in providing a diversified environment that is welcoming to all (Katz, 1989). In order for change to happen, evaluation of the cultural atmosphere needs to be ongoing. A pervasive attitude in counseling programs seems to be that if faculty members or students are not questioning the program’s commitment to diversity, everything must be satisfactory (Sherry et al., 2005). However, if the environment is not welcoming and inclusive, LGBT individuals and allies will be reluctant to step forward due to the lack of comfort that they feel. In this case, the exclusive environment perpetuates itself.

**QUEER THEORY**

Queer theory provides a framework for the comprehensive infusion of LGBT issues, under the umbrella of multiculturalism, into counselor education programs. Queer theory requires rethinking traditional concepts and definitions such as identity, psychopathology, gender, and sexuality. This theory challenges the status quo, which is responsible for perpetuating the homophobia and heterosexism that is found in all social systems (Tierney, 1997).

Queer theory is influenced by the social reform movement, which seeks to break down traditional ideas of what is normal and what is deviant by showing the queer in what is thought of as normal and the normal in what is seen as the queer (Tierney, 1997). Queer theory, then, is about inquiring how we know and do not know about things both normal and queer. The central struggle from this perspective is to deconstruct the meaning of deviance in relation to the norm and examine “how institutions control and legitimize certain discourses” (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, pg. 62).

Queer theory itself is derived from critical postmodernism. According to Peter McLaren (1995), “critical postmodernism takes into account both the macro-political level of structural organization and the micro-political level of different and contradictory manifestations of oppression as a means of analyzing global relations of oppression” (p. 209). Critical postmodernism also concerns itself with praxis. Praxis is a strategic approach to academic life that seeks to disrupt norms that silence individuals and groups so that the conditions for enablement and voice are created (Tierney, 1997).
Queer Theory and Multicultural Education

Queer theory argues that the current manifestations of multicultural education are doing little more than perpetuating the historical productions of heterosexuality and homosexuality that have served to regulate the power relationships of inequality (Sumara & Davis, 1999). The basis of this belief is that since multicultural education has been heavily influenced by identity politics, and has tended to incorporate the affirmation of identity categories, such education is having the unintended effect of perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing inequities by making the “other” more visible as the “other” (Carlson, 1998, p. 114).

Counselor educators have the task of assisting students to become aware of the issues behind the identity categories of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in order for them to become effective practitioners. However, the attainment of this awareness will take more than simple information acquisition because simply gaining knowledge does not automatically translate into increased counselor competency (Cannon, 2008; Kocarek & Pelling, 2003). Teaching for social change is only possible when we teach for subject change, which necessitates that every educator critique his or her own role in enforcing or challenging current identity categories (Eyre, 1993).

Queer theory proposes that curriculum and pedagogy can be used as avenues to interpret the particularities of the alleged differences among individuals, not merely among categories of people. Queer is not a signifier that merely represents lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender identities; rather, queer functions as a marker that actually refuses the cultural rewards afforded to those whose public behaviors are consistent with “proper” heterosexual identity (Sumara & Davis, 1999). Queer theorists are not only concerned with sexuality but how sexuality intersects with race, class, nationality, gender, age, ableness, and other identity categories that have long been the basis for the closure of rather than the pursuit of understanding about the lives of marginalized people (Turner, 2000).

Queer theory offers a new approach to counselor education that will assist educators and trainees in challenging traditional definitions of identity, gender, and sexuality (Carroll & Gilroy, 2001). Unlike current counselor education approaches to diversity that have been influenced by professional associations’ call for more specialized course offerings and focused content, queer theory challenges counselor educators to transcend this narrowness so that students learn to be “reflective scholar-practitioners in continuous interaction with ideas and with others holding similar and dissimilar views” (Martin, 1998, p. 7). One way that this may be accomplished is for counselor educators to emphasize counseling models that lend themselves to the basic suppositions of queer theory, specifically nontraditional approaches to therapy that promote an adherence to an “ethics and practice of freedom” (Foucault, 1985, p. 5), which means that human behavior is not dictated
by a set of universal laws and rules. Counselor educators can also encourage students to think carefully about how power operates in the lives of both counselor and client. Discussion of how this power can be used either malevolently or with integrity is beneficial to the students understanding as well (Johnson, 2006).

Morris (1998) identifies four characteristics of individuals who work from a queer curriculum perspective, they (a) digress from mainstream "official" discourse; (b) challenge the status quo by queerly reading texts (uncovering potentially radical politics) or queer texts (pointing out silences or the absence of marginalized groups and adding them to the text); (c) understand that curriculum is gendered, political, historical, racial, classed, and aesthetic; and (d) see themselves as a colearner with students (p. 284). Overall, the queer curriculum individual turns academic life "inside out, upside down, [and] backwards" (p. 285) by radically digressing from previously accepted practices and by altering the ways that educators think about curriculum (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995).

The incorporation of queer theory into counselor education has the potential to change the current training provided to future counselors. Teaching from a queer theory perspective means providing students with authentic experiences that replicate the phenomena under consideration as closely as possible while nonjudgmentally eliciting the students' thoughts about the experience. Such an approach helps students begin constructing their own knowledge base rather than unquestionably accepting the repetitions of knowledge that have been provided by traditional education (Lovell & McAuliffe, 1997).

Duckworth (1986) explained this concept by stating that a key aspect to learning is to experience the phenomena firsthand—the real thing, not books or lectures about it. Simply lecturing to students has the potential to leave them cold and disinterested in the subject matter. In other words, students may begin to sit back, stop thinking, and assume that what is being taught is right without critically understanding the material. However, by engaging students in the subject and following up by eliciting discussions about what they noticed and how they understand the information will help encourage them to become active learners. Encouraging students to explain their thoughts and make them clear to other people allows individuals to achieve greater clarity and understanding for themselves because much of the learning comes from personal understanding.

Practical Implementation of Queer Theory

According to Winslade, Monk, and Drewery (1997), three concepts are central to incorporating queer theory into counselor education: discourse, positioning, and deconstruction. Discourse refers to the "use of language as
a form of social practice" (p. 229). Counselor educators who wish to incorporate discourse into their pedagogy would give consideration to the power dynamics that are inherent in language and would work toward sensitizing students to identifying whose voice is being presented in course readings and texts. In addition, attention is also given to identifying whose voice has been left out or has been objectified and/or marginalized. Discursive practices occur at personal, political, and cultural levels and can offer different and often contradictory versions of reality.

**Positioning**, the second concept, states that the subjects within any discourse occupy hierarchical positions. The function of a discourse is to "offer a particular set of relationships that locate or situate the person in relation to the other phenomena inscribed by the discourse" (Winslade et al., 1997, p. 230). An example of discourse is the relationship between the terms *masculine* and *feminine*, both which refer to society's prescription of how the male and female genders are expected to behave. However, the subject may have different and contradictory positions depending on the social situation.

The third concept set forth by Winslade and colleagues (1997) related how educators may incorporate queer theory into counselor training programs is deconstruction. **Deconstruction** is the belief that the customary privilege given to the prevailing knowledge of society must be evaluated and challenged. This is particularly necessary when this knowledge is used to constitute everyday social practices. From a queer theory perspective deconstruction is similar to disrupting power structures by breaking down traditional ideas of what is normal and what is queer. One way that these power structures may be disrupted in counselor education is to regularly engage students in conversations and learning activities related to oppression. Through the exploration of oppressive practices in general, and how individuals are positioned in either dominant or subordinate positions specifically, students gain an understanding of the societal forces that are outside of the individual's personal control but have an impact on their well-being.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELOR EDUCATION**

The incorporation of queer theory into counselor education has the potential to change the current training provided to counselor trainees. Counselor education faculty members who teach from a queer theory perspective will create an environment that allows for the discourse, positioning, and deconstruction that Winslade and colleagues (1997) discuss and incorporates the characteristics identified by Morris (1998) into their curriculum. Teaching from a queer theory perspective would also mean providing the students with authentic experiences that replicate the phenomena under consideration
as closely as possible while nonjudgmentally eliciting the student's thoughts about the experience. This helps the students to begin constructing their own knowledge base rather than unquestionably accepting the repetitions of knowledge that has provided by traditional education (Lovell & McAuliffe, 1997).

The development of this type of environment has been found to have several desirable outcomes. Specifically, the counseling trainees will learn to think more clearly, the students themselves determine what is important, and they come to depend on one another. The end result is for students to begin to understand that all knowledge is constructed so that they can broaden their perspectives, complexify their cognition, and to amplify their imagination (Lovell & McAuliffe, 1997; Sumara & Davis, 1999). This is an important factor in helping trainees to understand the constructed nature of identity categories (e.g., lesbian women, gay men, bisexual men and women, transgender people, heterosexual men and women) and binary distinctions (gay/straight) and how these categories have been developed in relation to the dominant group norms and therefore marginalize those in the subordinate position.

CONCLUSION

The use of queer theory as an overarching umbrella may provide the theoretical and practical grounding that is required to ensure that future counselors are being provided with the necessary knowledge to appropriately provide affirmative counseling services to all diverse client groups, not just sexual minorities. According to Allison, Crawford, Echemendia, Robinson, and Knepp (1994), the responsibility for reaching such an inclusive goal must be taken on by all faculty and administrators in the program. Faculty members and administrators will be required to increase their competence in issues of diversity; significantly modify the training curriculum, clinical training, and supervision to incorporate diversity; and make a genuine commitment to remove institutional and programmatic barriers that block the infusion of diversity (Das, 1995).

An additional benefit of applying queer theory to counselor education relates to the overall programmatic multicultural training philosophy. While the components of a multicultural environment have been well-documented (Israel & Selvidge, 2003; Pope-Davis, Liu, Nevitt, & Toporek 2000), very little has been documented about how to go about implementing these changes. The underlying philosophies of queer theory may assist with the realization of these goals. Queer theory as pedagogy provides an appropriate framework for developing a comprehensive multicultural counseling training philosophy that better prepares culturally competent counselors.
REFERENCES


