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# Response to Signature Pedagogies: A Framework for Pedagogical Foundations in Counselor Education: Through a Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies Lens

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In response to Baltrinic and Wachter Morris' challenge, the authors discuss whether the counseling profession has a signature pedagogy in the area of multicultural and social justice competencies. The authors examine broad and specific features of signature pedagogies at the professional, program, and course levels for Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies.

*Keywords:* signature pedagogy, multicultural counseling competencies, social justice counseling

Baltrinic and Wachter Morris challenge us to examine our views on the pedagogical foundations of counselor education. They argue that signature pedagogies would aid in providing a unifying conceptual framework for pedagogical foundations in counselor education and provide examples at the professional, program, and course levels. Additionally, they outline specific reflection questions to help us continue the discussion. In this article, we will consider whether the counseling profession has a signature pedagogy related to multicultural and social justice competencies. We will first provide a brief summary of multicultural and social justice competencies in counselor education, and then following Baltrinic and Wachter Morris' example, we will discuss signature pedagogy related to multicultural and social justice competencies at the professional, program, and course levels.

## **Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies: Central to Counseling Profession**

Multicultural and social justice competencies are relatively new to counselor training. It was not until the 1994 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Program (CACREP) standards that curricular experiences in multicultural counseling were explicitly added into the Social and Cultural Foundations core area (CACREP,

1994). In 1992, Sue et al. developed the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC), and these were operationalized by Arredondo et al. in 1996. More recently, scholars recognizing the importance of intersectionality of identities, the relationship between oppression and mental health issues, and the importance of contextual factors have called for increased attention to social justice matters in all aspects of counseling (Chang et al., 2010; Gnilka et al., 2018). Based on the growing attention to social justice, Ratts (2009) argued that social justice in counseling should be considered the "fifth force" following the psychodynamic, behavioral, humanistic, and multicultural counseling forces.

Three professional documents illustrate the centrality of multiculturalism and social justice to the counseling profession. These are the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2003; Toporek & Daniels, 2018), the Multicultural Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015), and the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014). We also want to acknowledge that the CACREP standards (CACREP, 2015) require all counseling programs to have foundational knowledge related to social and cultural diversity. As articulated by Baltrinic and Wachter Morris, we do not want to overly rely on CACREP standards

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because some counseling programs are not CACREP-accredited and some CACREP programs are accredited under different versions of the standards (i.e., 2009 standards, 2016 standards); however, we believe it is important to acknowledge that by having social and cultural diversity as one of the eight common core areas consistently across updates, social and cultural diversity is a value that underscores CACREP standards. Additionally, ACA's assertion that CACREP is the pathway to licensure for independent practice for all professional counselors further highlights the importance of the common core areas, including social and cultural diversity, as outlined by CACREP (ACA, n.d.).

The 2003 ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2003) were updated in 2018 by Toporek and Daniels. In the updated Advocacy Competencies, the authors kept the original framework, which included two dimensions (i.e., extent of client involvement; level of advocacy intervention) across six domains of advocacy: (a) client/student empowerment, (b) client/student advocacy, (c) community collaboration, (d) systems advocacy, (e) collective action (formerly public information), and (f) social/political advocacy (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). The updated ACA Advocacy Competencies clarify the dimensions and the domains as well as elaborate on the specific advocacy strategies. New in the updated version is the inclusion of multicultural and ethical considerations (Toporek & Daniels, 2018).

The original MCC (Sue et al., 1992) were revised and updated in 2015 to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015). These competencies were endorsed by the ACA governing council in 2015, signifying the need to integrate multicultural and social justice competencies into all areas of the counseling profession. The term *social justice* was added to the title of the revised competencies to reflect the increasing body of literature on the interaction between multicultural competence and social justice. The inclusion of the relationship between the client and the professional counselor as a major developmental domain and the emphasis on action as an area of competence represent the major shifts in this revision. The MSJCC framework includes four quadrants (i.e., privileged counselor–privileged cli-

ent; privileged counselor–marginalized client; marginalized counselor–privileged client; marginalized counselor–marginalized client), developmental domains (i.e., counselor self-awareness, client worldview, the counseling relationship [new], and counseling and advocacy interventions [revised to add advocacy], and competencies [i.e., attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and action [new]). The MSJCC are intended to provide the counseling profession a framework for integrating multicultural and social justice competencies into counseling practice, counselor training and supervision, research, and advocacy (Ratts et al., 2015).

The 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* included standards specific to addressing multicultural and social justice competencies (i.e., Standard A.2.c. Developmental and Cultural Sensitivity; A.4.b. Personal Values; A.7.a. Advocacy; A.7.b. Confidentiality and Advocacy; B.1.a. Multicultural/Diversity Considerations). In the preamble section of the 2014 version, the core values of the counseling profession are expanded. Two of the five core professional values specifically relate to multicultural and social justice competence (i.e., honoring diversity, promoting social justice), further highlighting the centrality of multicultural competencies and social justice in the counseling profession. Additionally, the *ACA Code of Ethics* state that professional counselors are ethically responsible for using evidence-based practice, which translates to counselor educators being responsible for ensuring that our students learn how to implement evidence-based practice. It is important to note that the expectations are that all professional counselors follow the values, principles, and standards outlined in the ACA codes, not just ACA members.

The ACA Advocacy Competencies, the MSJCC, and the *ACA Code of Ethics* are specific to the counseling profession and provide the counseling profession with a set of competencies, values, and best practices that are core to counseling training and practice. However, they do not provide specific guidelines or outline ways in which counselor educators should train future professional counselors to be multiculturally and socially just. Thus, they represent aspects of signature pedagogy as outlined by Baltrinic and Wachter Morris (2020).

### Teaching and Learning Strategies

Many scholars have provided teaching and learning strategies for how counselor educators can teach students to be more culturally competent and socially just in their practice. In fact, Barrio Minton et al. (2018), in their content analysis of peer-reviewed articles regarding teaching and learning published in ACA and ACA division journals, reported that nearly one-third of the articles in their analysis focused on the content area of social and cultural diversity. Priester et al. (2008) conducted a content analysis of syllabi from multicultural counseling courses and found instructors used a variety of teaching strategies, with journal writing (56%), cultural self-examination papers (42%), reaction papers to a book or film (35%), reaction papers to a work of art (34%), and attendance at a cultural event where the student was the minority (34%) being the most frequent. Consistent with Priester and colleagues (2008), many scholars have recommended integrating experiential learning in multicultural courses to increase multicultural and social justice competencies (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002) and multicultural immersion experiences (Barden & Cashwell, 2013; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005), to strengthen the teaching alliance (Estrada, 2015).

Although the majority of the literature related to multicultural counseling courses appears to be conceptual in nature, there have been several empirically based studies that have examined specific teaching and learning strategies. Zeleke et al. (2018) found that students' level of multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skill increased at the end of a multicultural counseling course that used a self-regulated learning pedagogy. The use of photovoice was found to be effective in facilitating student processing and increased self-reflection in a multicultural course (Paone et al., 2018). Smith et al. (2017) found that through the use of photographic and written journal entries, students in a multicultural course were able to reflect more deeply and uncover their experiences with microaggressions. Sandplay was found to facilitate greater insight and understanding of racial identity development (Paone et al., 2015). Brown and colleagues (2014) reported that students in a multicultural course found active learning strategies and a supportive learning environment to be important factors in their learning. Active learning strategies that facilitate self-reflection and experien-

tial techniques are effective ways within the counseling profession to promote multicultural and social justice competencies. Although these teaching strategies represent particular types of teaching (surface structures — “what” teachers do) by counselor educators to prepare students to be culturally competent and socially just, they are not pervasive, nor are they established broadly across training institutions.

Based on the current literature and the recency of the multicultural and social justice movement within the counseling profession, we do not believe that the counseling professional has a signature pedagogy related to multicultural and social justice competencies; however, we do believe the counseling profession has signature practices across professional, program, and course levels that, over time, may develop into a signature pedagogy.

### **Signature Pedagogy: Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies**

#### **Professional Level**

At the professional level, we believe there are professional values and standards that are common for training professional counselors, regardless of institution and level of training (master's vs. doctoral). These standards are articulated in the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Toporek & Daniels, 2018), MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2015), and the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2014). ACA's endorsement of the MSJCC further illuminates the significance of multicultural and social justice competencies to the counseling profession and indicates that multicultural and social justice competencies may be a signature pedagogy for the counseling profession. We believe counseling educators must instill in all students the core professional value of honoring diversity and respecting social justice, and the specific knowledge necessary to be a professional counselor as outlined in the other standards, which all reflect these two core professional values. These standards represent the implicit structure of signature pedagogy, or “why” counselor educators do what they do. What is less evident is “what” (surface structure) and “how” (deep structure) the counseling profession prepares students to embody and

implement these two core professional values and the standards supporting these values.

### **Program Level**

At the program level, master's students are typically required to successfully complete a course in social and cultural diversity prior to engaging in clinical experiences such as practicum and internship. This prerequisite requirement highlights the importance of the multicultural training (i.e., course content, immersive experiences, and self-reflections) necessary in doing clinical counseling work with real-life clients. For example, through the multicultural counseling course, a student may become more aware of a bias that they hold against a particular group of people. Having discovered this particular bias in their multicultural counseling course, they are better able to continue increasing their awareness of the ways in which they may negatively impact future clients with their biases, they can receive direct and corrective feedback from instructors, and ultimately, they can potentially spare future clients from harm done unto them had they not taken such a course early in their training.

While at least one multicultural counseling course is required for master's-level students in order to promote signature pedagogy in the area of multicultural and social justice competencies, we believe that multiculturalism and social justice competencies should be taught and infused throughout other courses across the program. Per the 2016 CACREP standards, accredited programs must demonstrate how social and cultural diversity is taught across curricula with respect to the following topics: (a) within- and between-group characteristics, nationally and internationally; (b) theories and models of multicultural counseling, cultural identity development, and social justice and advocacy; (c) multicultural counseling competencies; (d) the impact of one's own worldview on their views of others; (e) the effects of power and privilege on clients, counselors, and the counseling relationship; (f) help-seeking behaviors of diverse clients; (g) the impact of spiritual beliefs on clients' and counselors' worldviews; and (h) strategies for identifying and eliminating barriers, prejudices, and processes of intentional and unintentional oppression and discrimination (CACREP, 2015, p. 11).

We believe that programs should strive to implement these topics not only in the multicultural counseling course, but also across different program tracks (i.e., clinical mental health counseling, school counseling, marriage and family therapy, clinical rehabilitation counseling, career counseling, addictions counseling, and college counseling). In determining "what" and "how" the counselor educator will infuse multicultural and social justice competencies into their curriculum, the counselor educator will want to reflect on their teaching philosophy, their teaching style, and the learning style and developmental levels of their students. While conversations surrounding multiculturalism and social justice in school counseling might be focused on the development of children and adolescents and engaging their families, a clinical rehabilitation counseling program track might be more focused on diversity and social justice of ability statuses. In practice, conversations about multiculturalism and social justice should be taking place at all points of the program and in each course, regardless of track, to reflect the pervasiveness of cultural considerations in working with clients and students from all backgrounds and across all settings.

In order for us to clearly state that multicultural and social justice competencies are reflected at the program level, we must be able to answer the following question: What should students know, understand, and be able to do as a result of completing coursework focused and infused with multiculturalism and social justice? And, how are counselor educators infusing this knowledge into their program, regardless of track and degree level? The review of literature provides some insight into what programs believe are essential content that students should know and which learning strategies some counselor educators are using in their multicultural courses (see Paone et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017; Zeleke et al., 2018), but to date there is no evidence that the content and learning strategies are pervasive across all counseling programs.

### **Course Level**

At the course level, the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Toporek & Daniels, 2018), MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2015), the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2014), and the CACREP standards (CACREP, 2015) provide instructors with learning objectives

and course requirements for promoting multicultural and social justice competencies. Priester et al.'s (2008) findings suggest that there are some similarities in pedagogical approaches used to promote multicultural and social justice competencies. Multicultural scholars also have recommended specific learning strategies to foster multicultural and social justice competencies. However, we do not know how consistently counseling programs adhere to these standards and competencies, nor do we know if these standards actually result in distinct student learning experiences.

Surface structures used to help students grow in multicultural knowledge, skills, and awareness are didactic, experiential, and reflective in nature. In order to gain multicultural knowledge, students may be required to engage with seminal texts and works such as Sue and Sue (2015) and Ratts et al. (2015) along with didactic training like lectures and guest speakers with expertise. They may even undergo a knowledge check on this information in the form of a formal assessment or writing assignment. Additionally, we believe that students should be engaged in group and experiential activities such as student growth groups, role play scenarios, and thought-provoking exercises. Priester and colleagues (2008) found that the emphasis of most multicultural counseling courses was knowledge of diverse groups and self-awareness, and the most common teaching strategies were journal writing, a cultural self-examination paper, reacting to a book or film with a cultural focus, and attending a cultural event in which the student is the minority. In other courses such as practicum and internship, students may be required to submit case presentations or conceptualizations along with a tape of their counseling sessions. As part of this presentation or conceptualization, students should be required to consider the cultural implications of their interaction with a client. This may include, but is not limited to: (a) cultural biases they have toward their clients, (b) cultural biases their client may have toward them, (c) how their own cultural background and values may enhance or impede the therapeutic relationship, and (d) culturally relevant strategies for working with that client based on what is known about them. As such, surface structures are in place so that students have the foundational knowledge, skills, and awareness

necessary to provide culturally sensitive and ethically sound services.

Deep structures are guided by an instructor's teaching philosophy, and are rooted in the values of our profession. Constructivist (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2002), learner-centered (Moate & Cox, 2015), and transparent pedagogies (Dollarhide et al., 2007) may give insight into *how* a course is designed and executed, and how students are evaluated within courses. However, being that instructors are bound to hold differing teaching philosophies, we believe that there are elements of multicultural training that are present regardless of instructor style and student learning needs. Self-reflection and self-awareness, for example, are typically entrenched not only in the multicultural counseling course, but across a training program. In any given course, students are asked to reflect on the course content and wrestle with how it might apply to them and their work, or even how it impacts them personally. For example, in a counseling theories course, students may be led to consider all the theories they have learned about and to decide on a theoretical orientation that best fits their personal beliefs and values about how humans change. Additionally, they may be asked to consider the types of clients and presenting concerns for which said theory would be a better or worse fit based on cultural considerations such as age, gender, race or ethnicity, ability status, and sexual orientation. Through an assignment such as this one, students gain awareness about how their own belief system interacts with the content they are learning in courses, and leads them to reflect on what this means for their work with clients. It is our belief that self-reflection and increased self-awareness are at the core of pedagogical practices in multiculturalism and social justice, regardless of varying approaches and styles. Self-reflection and self-awareness can be fostered through various teaching strategies including journaling, guided reflections, and open dialogue.

Implicit structures represent the *why* behind the instructor's style of teaching and course content, and stem from our professional codes of ethics, competencies, and accreditation standards. In essence, these structures are in place to protect the individuals whom we serve, to promote student

growth and learning, and to help maintain a standard of professionalism in the field. As previously stated, the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* states five core professional values of the counseling profession, two of which specifically relate to multicultural and social justice competence — “honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural context; promoting social justice” (ACA, 2014, p. 3). It is this underlying guideline of our profession that holds space for both surface and deep structures in multicultural and social justice training to thrive.

### Discussion

We believe there are signature practices that are pervasive in all counseling programs related to training counseling students to become multicultural and social justice competent; however, we question whether the counseling profession has or needs to have a signature pedagogy at this time. Shulman (2005) argued that signature pedagogies are important because they outline the styles of teaching and instruction, which are common to specific professions. Signature pedagogies define what knowledge is important in a particular discipline and how this knowledge is imparted to the students. Signature pedagogies are the mechanism for how professions instruct their novice “to think, to perform, and to act with integrity” (Shulman, 2005, p. 2). To some degree, the ACA Advocacy Competencies, the MSJCC, and the *ACA Code of Ethics* provide specific knowledge and competencies that are central to counselor training and provide guidelines for how counselor trainees ought to think, perform, and act with integrity. Additionally, various scholars have presented teaching and learning strategies for how to impart that knowledge to students, which represents an additional aspect of signature pedagogies. However, there is a dearth of research on multicultural and social justice pedagogy to declare which styles of teaching and instruction are common and, more importantly, which ones are efficacious to the counseling profession in this content area; therefore, we do not believe the counseling professional can claim that multicultural and social justice competence is a signature pedagogy for the discipline. There are general frameworks regarding the importance of multicultural and social justice

competence in counselor training that are rooted in the MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2015) and the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014). In our opinion, general frameworks are the starting point for the development of a signature pedagogy.

Honoring diversity and promoting social justice are core values of the counseling profession and within the area of multicultural and social justice counseling competencies, there are standard knowledge, competencies, and broad learning strategies that we believe are universal across counseling programs. Good pedagogy requires that we, as instructors, have a broad range of teaching strategies and an awareness of what creates student learning (Chapuis, 2003). In the absence of robust research supporting signature pedagogy related to multicultural and social justice competence, are we better off having a general framework with agreed-upon knowledge and an approach to learning informed by standards of the profession and research in pedagogy in counselor education; thus, allowing for programs and instructors to be flexible, dynamic, and responsive to their diverse student body, program, and community? The general framework would include specific content knowledge as outlined in the MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2015), the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Toporek & Daniels, 2018), and experiential learning strategies that promote self-reflection, self-awareness, and empathy development for others (e.g., journal writing, attending cultural events). Additionally, the general framework would include skill-based training to implement culturally relevant interventions (e.g., real plays). As the research in pedagogy in counselor education in general and in the content area of multicultural and social justice counseling competencies continues to grow, so will the discussion and argument for a signature pedagogy in this content area.

In order to inform and advance our discussion, as well as adhere to the ACA Code of Ethics regarding evidence-based practice, we encourage scholars to pursue the following research questions, which could provide evidence that multicultural and social justice competencies have both broad and specific features of signature pedagogy.

Research questions to support broad features:  
 What is distinct about how counselor education programs teach students to be multicultural and social  
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justice competent? What are the pervasive curriculum elements across all counselor education programs related to multicultural and social justice competence? What are the common learning outcomes related to multicultural and social justice competence across all counselor education programs? What common teaching approaches and interventions are counselor educators using across programs?

Research questions to support specific features: How do counselor educators prepare professional counselors to think like multicultural and social justice advocates? What teaching methods do counselor educators use to teach counselors in training to be culturally self-aware? What teaching methods do counselor educators use to teach counselors in training knowledge about other cultures? What teaching methods do counselor educators use to teach counselors in training multicultural and socially just interventions? What pedagogy is key or unique to training counselors-in-training to be multicultural and social justice competent? How does the multicultural and social justice competencies relate to specific client outcomes? What teaching interventions and strategies are used most frequently in a multicultural counseling course?

As the scholarship of teaching and learning in multicultural and social justice counseling competencies grows, this will help inform best practices for preparing counselors in training to be multicultural and social justice competent as well as identify teaching and learning strategies that are pervasive within the counseling profession. This research, although informed by the preexisting standards, will help shape the revision of future standards. Outcomes from the proposed research questions mentioned previously would provide compelling evidence that multicultural and social justice competencies are a signature pedagogy for the counseling profession.

We are interested in hearing from others who may have similar and differing perspectives on whether there should be a signature pedagogy related to multicultural and social justice competencies in the counseling field. We leave that discussion open for our readers to reflect based on the previous discussion, and Baltrinic and Wachter Morris' parting challenging in their article: "We will leave it

to our capable colleagues to help us continue the dialogue" (p. 10).

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