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Enhancing Cultural Competence in Counselor Education through Sociolinguistic Awareness

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Abstract

Language plays a central role in building a therapeutic working alliance. Language is essential in building trust, conveying empathy, and creating shared meaning between counselors and clients. Nevertheless, language can equally harm the working alliance if used insensitively or without awareness of cultural and social differences. Sociolinguistic awareness emphasizes the interpretational nature of language and how it can unintentionally perpetuate discrimination against marginalized identities. Counselor educators can utilize sociolinguistic principles to model and teach the significance of language in counseling and its relationship to multicultural competency and cultural humility. This article highlights how clients' language may connect to their social perspective and identity expression and discusses how language can be used by the counselor to avoid misunderstandings, microaggressions, or aggressions.

Significance to the Public

The article has significant implications for promoting ethical and effective counseling to enhance student multicultural competency. When counselors gain sensitivity to the culturally centralized messages embedded in common phrases and expressions, unintended messages with the potential to distance clients can be minimized to improve care and strengthen the therapeutic relationship.

Keywords: cultural humility, multicultural competency, sociolinguistics, language, therapeutic alliance

Teaching cultural humility in practice and theory is essential to counselor education. The definition of *counseling*, endorsed by 29 major counseling organizations, states counseling is "a professional relationship that empowers *diverse* individuals, families, and groups [emphasis added] to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals" (Kaplan et al., 2014, p. 366). It is an ethical imperative for counselors to work competently with individuals who embody a diversity of perspectives, experiences, and cultures (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). Counseling organizations advocate for the need to approach multicultural counseling competence (MCC) and diversity, equity, inclusion, antiracism, and belongingness (DEI-AB) from a social justice perspective (Ratts et al., 2015). As such, a wealth of knowledge and resources are increasingly available to assist counselors and educators in developing cultural humility and awareness skills necessary for clinical work in cross-cultural settings. Nevertheless, counselor trainees and beginning counselors need support in bridging the gap between multicultural theory and clinical applications. Research reveals that counselors' perceived levels of personal MCC only sometimes align with clients' perceptions of their counselor's MCC (Dillon et al., 2016), confirming that disparities persist in delivering culturally competent service.

Extending cultural considerations into counseling learning environments, such as the classroom and practicum, is an appropriate next step in addressing competency disparities that continue.

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Cultural competence in counseling differs distinctly from the absence of conscious prejudices, biases, or racism toward any population. Cultural humility goes beyond acceptance or tolerance for diversity; it entails actively seeking to understand and appreciate cultural differences, challenging one's biases and assumptions, and adapting behavior and communication to be more inclusive and culturally sensitive. The multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (MSJCCs) identify *self-awareness* as the initial developmental layer needed for multicultural and social justice competence (Ratts et al., 2015). The connection between safety as a necessary state for learning to occur reaches as far back in mental health literature as Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation. Schroeder et al. (2023) shape the construct of trauma-informed campuses, featuring safe learning environments to support student learning and development. Their concept of the *trauma-informed campus* relies upon the learning environment to actively center safety in process and practice by recognizing and responding to structural and historical harms. *Cultural safety* (Curtis et al., 2019) is necessary in counselor training to explore cultural *self-awareness* with counseling students.

Creating an environment where clients can authentically bring their whole selves to counseling sessions is vital to the working alliance and can be mirrored by students with clients when educators embrace and model cultural humility through inclusive practices in classroom teaching. Central to this endeavor is an acute awareness of the subjective perspectives and context-dependent nature of communication within the counseling relationship. Linguistic expressions, whether deliberate or not, are critical signals individuals interpret to establish a sense of relative safety emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Research underscores the essential role of inclusive language in establishing safe environments (Haas et al., 2022) that influence the learning process (Schroeder et al., 2023). Consequently, unintentional linguistic choices can also perpetuate discrimination against marginalized identities (Angouri & Baxter, 2021), highlighting the imperative for counselors and educators to promote social justice through mindful language use.

Awareness of the social aspects of language, or *sociolinguistic awareness,* is necessary for MCC because language is a primary means of demonstrating competence and building meaningful relationships with clients of all backgrounds. We conceptually explore the interpretational nature of language, emphasizing its profound effect on the client–counselor dynamic and consider practical strategies that educators can implement to influence students' learning directly. By integrating MCC principles, cultural humility, and inclusive language promotion in the classroom, educators can effectively reduce microaggressions and enhance students' cognitive complexity (Blocher, 1983), which in turn, translates into more effective clinical applications with clients.

Practical recommendations are summarized to encourage a sociolinguistic-informed approach to support counselors-in-training in effectively engaging with clients from the relational cultural theory (RCT) framework.

An Overview of Language and Counseling

In addition to theoretical support, relevant research indicates Before addressing the relationship between MCC, cultural humility, and sociolinguistics, we start with the presupposition that language informs and influences the practice of counseling. We provide a brief overview of counseling theories and skills emphasizing language as a healing tool. Although inexhaustive, this overview intends to clearly illustrate the role of language in counseling.

Counseling is deeply rooted in and reliant on language (Wachtel, 2011). Although different counseling theories approach language use in distinctive ways, addressing, acknowledging, and revising language is at the core of several theories. Narrative therapy is a prime example of how theories use language to facilitate healing. Narrative therapy assists individuals in re-storying their

experiences (Madigan, 2019). While the process of re-authoring and other interventions in narrative therapy are more sophisticated than this brief exploration allows, the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the clients' narratives help externalize problems and promote healing by changing the words used to describe stories and problems. More than a simple semantic shift, the intervention requires understanding the underlying meanings embedded in the language used and harnessing that affective power to create a new narrative.

Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) also acknowledges the power of language in reframing. A principle of CBT is to revise individuals' thoughts, behaviors, and moods (Beck, 2020), and interventions in CBT focus on shifting the language of clients' automatic thoughts. CBT posits that underlying beliefs can be challenged, changed, or modified by shifting the words and meaning of the cognitions related to a belief. Correspondingly, dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), influenced by CBT, identifies mindfulness of accurate language use and modification to teach critical skills, such as labeling emotions to increase emotional regulation or practicing being gentle to maintain relationships when striving for interpersonal effectiveness (Linehan, 2015). Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) also emphasizes language in counseling interventions (Hayes et al., 2012). Closely connected to relational frame theory (RFT), ACT is a theory of cognition and language. The creators of ACT were deeply interested in how the communication between client and therapist could motivate change, basing the theoretical foundation of ACT on the fundamental tenants of language use in contextualized relational environments.

Beyond specific theoretical orientations, foundational counseling skills depend on language selection (Wachtel, 2011). Counselors in training are instructed to elicit client information in interviews, reflect feelings and meaning back to clients, reframe narratives, give feedback, and demonstrate understanding through summarization restatements without echoing a client's exact words (Young, 2017). Counselor education programs often instruct practicum students to explore meaning without directly using "why?" questions. Counseling students learn to resist directly questioning, "How does that make you feel?," and instead use context and creativity to convey experiential processes meaningfully. Effective communication requires using care in language selection. One popularized communication technique is to use "I" statements and avoid overgeneralizing when expressing feelings (Gordon, 1970). This technique focuses on communicating underlying emotion. Rephrasing statements from "you did" to "I feel" can significantly improve outcomes by reducing the activation of the listener's defenses.

In many ways, counselors already appreciate the value of attending to the nuances of embedded communication and intentional reframing in their work. We advocate expanding this attention to the role of language in counseling to explicit awareness of enhanced MCC through the lens of sociolinguistics.

Sociolinguistics and Multicultural Competency

From a sociological approach, sociolinguistics is concerned with the elements of language that identify social relationships and relational significance in situations (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2008; Zhu et al., 2021). In this, language is a narrative tool used in meaning-making and expressive of local positionings, both ethnographically and interactionally (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Understanding sociolinguistics as microskills is valuable due to the centrality of language in forging relationships with clients, and at the core of the counseling relationship is the working alliance. Components of the working alliance include the personal attributes of the counselor, as well as effective use of techniques, including reflection (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003; Finsrud et al., 2022). In addition to the working alliance, various other factors affect treatment outcomes in counseling, including the counselor's MCC (Tao et al., 2015). MCC requires counselors to display skills, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and

actions (Ratts et al., 2015), principally mediated through language. As suggested in a model for broaching issues of culture in counseling, the first step in joining with the client is to "use the client's language to build rapport" (Day-Vines et al., 2021, p. 353). Clients rely in part on the counselor's language to assess trust levels, emotional safety, and the potential for the counselor's comprehension. This assessment influences decisions regarding what they feel comfortable sharing with the counselor.

Counselors adapt their language use with clients (Monacelli, 2023), and a common language develops between the counselor and client when creating a working alliance in counseling. A client and counselor can collaboratively develop a shared language, creatively assigning words or phrases beyond tight prescriptive meanings as a conceptual shorthand for shared understandings or choosing expressions to convey more powerful messages (Strong, 2006). More than simply exchanging information, the cocreation of language between clients and counselors allows for collaboration, meaning-making, and shared understandings (Strong, 2006; Winslade, 2005) to empower the client to express themselves more fully. However, it is necessary to note that the effectiveness of this process relies on the client feeling supported and safe to share fully. The words people choose, whether consciously or unconsciously, reveal the social position held and can signal group belonging or membership (Haas et al., 2022). When clients believe their counselor's word choices suggest differing personal beliefs, they might assume that the counselor will not understand or accept where they are coming from, leading to hesitancy in expressing themselves fully. This perception could cause the client to hold back important information, inadvertently creating a barrier to maintaining the therapy's effectiveness. It may even result in the client's withdrawal from the therapeutic process altogether.

Code-switching illustrates the adaptability of language use and modification to fit the speaker's context. The term *code-switching* was initially introduced to describe switching between two or more languages, such as English and Spanish (Benson, 2001), and expanded to include the use of different dialects, tones, grammar, or word choices to conceal or showcase a particular social location or identity (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). It is a common phenomenon among bilingual or multilingual speakers. Its application may involve various motivations, such as accommodating the listener, expressing identity, emphasizing a point, or creating a sense of closeness (Heller, 1988; Valdés, 2001).

Code-switching is one way people use language to navigate social situations and the language that conveys positionality. It is the practice of intentionally selecting words to contextualize messages in interactions (Nilep, 2006). Recognizing the cultural nuances implicit in communication and its effects can help counselors understand how clients convey their experiences and respond in a way that invites further discussion to facilitate the client's expression of cultural, personal, and social experiences in counseling (Winslade, 2005).

Shared language co-constructed between a counselor and a client can promote a sense of connection and trust. However, perceptions of inauthenticity or concealment of the counselor's true intentions may generate the opposite effect, potentially leading to clients feeling unsafe and code-switching to protect themselves. Research in other fields indicates that individuals feeling obliged to conform and code-switching to manage identity expression has adverse effects on the working alliance and socio-psychological effects on the client's mental health (Gaither et al., 2013).

Traditional training and scientific inquiry have underfocused on the experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, and focused primarily on people from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies, particularly American undergraduates (Henrich et al., 2010a, 2010b), thus broadly limiting awareness of microaggressions embedded in language and the harms imposed. In American culture, language often centers dominant culture norms and values. Subtle and overt messages of white superiority reinforce prejudicial language already saturated in society (Callanan,

2012; Conlin & Davie, 2015). Aversive racism is subconsciously normalized, and implicit bias serves to dissociate underlying discrimination from conscious awareness further (Boysen, 2010). For instance, in mainstream media historically marginalized populations were frequently portrayed to commit crimes or as gang members, generating an insidious association with criminality and inferiority beneath the conscious awareness of viewers (Like-Haislip, 2014; Seate & Mastro, 2015).

Clients most vulnerable to the effects of racialization and marginalization may feel constant pressure to present adapted versions of themselves to fit in, be accepted, and feel safe. Creating in these clients a need for acute sensitivity to safety cues and greater attunement to descriptive language. Counselors must broach the implications of this phenomenon with clients.

Proactive awareness of how language is interpreted differently in various social contexts is an increasingly relevant responsibility for counselors whose identities intersect with the dominant culture. Counselor language may inadvertently create therapeutic ruptures (Yeo & Torres-Harding, 2021), especially when working across culture, ability, or social class. Counselors of cross-cultural clients are more likely to prevent microinvalidations during counseling sessions when they intentionally engage in cultural humility to counteract the effects of implicit messaging.

Maintaining therapeutic trust requires a significant level of skill and awareness on the part of the counselor, starting with understanding the sociolinguistic implications of language. When a rupture occurs in the working alliance, repair requires resolution strategies beyond what is typically necessary to establish the initial rapport. According to Yeo and Torres-Harding's (2021) study, racial microaggressions influenced every aspect of the working alliance. Strategies of openness and empathy did not resolve or even moderate the effects of microaggression-induced therapeutic ruptures in the relationship. While avoiding all possible ruptures with clients is impossible, it is better to work to prevent rupture than to work to repair it (Davis et al., 2016). Recognizing context's importance in shaping words' meaning can help avoid misunderstandings and empower clients' authenticity. This awareness translates to discursive strategies counselors can use to convey cultural humility (Zhu et al., 2021) and foster a counseling environment to be a safer space where clients do not reexperience marginalization or need to code-switch.

Lessons From the Literature: Language Interpretation and Use

In addition to theoretical support, relevant research indicates that word choice is used to interpret social positionality of the speaker and influences the client–counselor relationship (Zhu et al., 2021). Starting first with an in-depth exploration of the use of language to convey positionality, a qualitative study investigated perceptions of community subgroups following the 2014 police shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, with significant findings related to language selection and interpretation reliant on social positioning (Haas et al., 2022). The study used consensual multidyadic methodology to explore subgroups' social perspectives and meaning-making processes within the community phenomenology. The study identified how language conveyed meaning and interpretation of events based on subgroup membership. Members of different subgroups preferred different terms to describe the events in Ferguson, with some participants preferring terms like *uprising* or *civil unrest*, while others used the word *rioting*. The study also indicated differing interpretations of language used for racial equity development, specifically, the use of *racial reconciliation*:

> For some members of the protest group, this term suggests returning to a previous era of racial unity that has never existed in the United States and, therefore, conjured ideals of suppression, keeping marginalized communities silent rather than addressing systemic modernity issues. (Haas et al., 2022, p. 16)

Another significant study finding (Haas et al., 2022) was how participants interpreted word choices to determine political positionality and out-group membership. Participants corrected the language used in the interviews. One participant shared, "*I use mechanisms until I figure out which side of the coin you are on*" to determine the other speaker's positionality before engaging (Haas et al., 2022, p. 12). Based on the participants' shared experiences, the researchers found that "consciously or unconsciously, descriptive language revealed the social perspective, or positionality, of the speaker" (p. 12).

Other studies on MCC also illustrate the crucial role of word selection and interpretation in building trust and rapport. Researchers exploring working alliance in a cross-racial counseling dyad found that the counselor's use of the client's terminology within the scope of the client's belief system helped the client feel understood and validated (Gundel et al., 2020). Additionally, a thematic analysis of cultural conversations in counseling (Trevino et al., 2021) and a case study on integrating spirituality also found intentional language useful for conveying cultural understanding to clients (Winkeljohn Black et al., 2021). These studies suggest that mirroring the client's language communicates value toward the client's culture, beliefs, and experiences. Language can also communicate power, including using language to empower clients or decrease the positioning of the counselor as the expert (Monacelli, 2023; Zhu et al., 2021).

Language demonstrates social understanding of meaning-making systems. It can increase trust or suspicion, and how counselors use language can directly impact client relationships and the working alliance (Yeo & Torres-Harding, 2021). Previous research indicated that clients may interpret the counselor's language use as a form of social or political self-disclosure (Haas et al., 2022) and an indication of MCC (Gundel et al., 2020; Trevino et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2021). Therefore, counselor educators and supervisors must prepare counselors-in-training to anticipate and navigate language interpretation by clients and to gain comfort broaching these topics.

Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

Our discussion focuses on practical training strategies for incorporating multicultural learning and pluralistic characteristics, emphasizing sociolinguistic awareness throughout the counseling curriculum. Based on current research, these strategies aim to decenter the dominant culture in program curricula by introducing sociolinguistic awareness and implementing it in practice.

Teaching

Singh et al. (2020) urged the profession to adopt a nondominant perspective to critically examine factors hindering social justice in counselor education. Promoting inclusive and equitable practices was emphasized for enhancing the quality of education by improving cultural sensitivity and the student learning experience. Culturally responsive practices in counseling acknowledge individuals as embedded within cultural contexts, comprising their experiences and ascribed and achieved characteristics, which include identity intersections of race, sex, country of origin, language, abilities, religion, education, gender, socioeconomic status, and social position. Adequate understanding of the client's worldview and core beliefs, in conjunction with knowledge of salient characteristics, is important in attending to culture in counseling (Lira, 2022).

Culturally sensitive classrooms are collaborative learning environments that incorporate diversity and tailor teaching to the unique perspectives of the students represented (see Trahan & Keim, 2019, for practice application). Integrating MCC with sociolinguistic awareness (Ridley et al., 2011) and foundational skills can significantly influence students' critical thinking development to consider diverse perspectives and practices respectfully and thoughtfully. It enhances students' skills to practice from a culturally responsive lens and to thrive

professionally in an increasingly diverse world. Dorn-Medeiros et al. (2020) recommended teaching approaches based on relationships rather than just didactic approaches to help motivate students and increase comfort taking risks.

RCT as a Teaching Framework

From feminist and social justice theories, relational cultural theory (RCT) emphasizes relationships in human development and well-being. Its relational paradigm supports inclusive approaches for facilitating cultural humility, decentralizing dominant cultural norms, and combining microskills development with MSJCCs (Comstock et al., 2008). As a theoretical framework, integrating RCT into course programming creates culturally responsive learning outcomes that align with specific course goals (Ormseth, 2020) achievable in any counseling course (Jordan, 2018; Melamed et al., 2020), in supervision (Duffey et al., 2016), and clinical field experience courses (Hammer et al., 2020; Kress et al., 2018; see Singh, 2019, for more). The RCT framework can help integrate social justice and equity advocacy principles into counselor curricula to provide comprehensive training infused with MSJCCs. Strategies include diversifying course materials to invest multiple knowledge perspectives, encouraging personal reflection and critical self-exploration, and using instructor modeling techniques to facilitate skill acquisition through example.

Instructors can model inclusive language in the classroom by defaulting to neutral identifiers such as, *they/their* pronouns and using *partner* or *relationship* to decentralize assumptive dominant norms. Inviting students to self-identify demonstrates respect and contributes to a welcoming environment that encourages all students to participate and contribute. It also minimizes power structures and normalizes these concepts for less familiar students to help prepare them for clinical practice where counselor presence and authenticity hold essential roles. Consistent application and reinforcement in written course materials, such as in the syllabus and learning management software (LMS), and providing supplemental learning materials, may aid learning for resistant or unfamiliar students.

Assignments and Supplements

Trahan and Keim (2019) argue that all counseling is cross-cultural, so it is essential to decentralize dominant cultural norms in counselor training programs. Counselor training programs must integrate cultural competence throughout the curriculum instead of relying solely on a multicultural counseling course (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2023). Instructors can enhance existing learning assessments in any course by incorporating MCC and sociolinguistic awareness measures in existing assignments, case examples, and role-play activities by including diverse cultural components, such as intersectional identities for the case subject. Updated evaluation rubrics can include assessing ethical and cultural responsivity strategies and culturally relevant language considerations.

The following section provides example activities for developing sociolinguistic awareness and cultural humility. The activities are designed to be adapted in a variety of settings. The first exercise is intended to introduce students to the concept of sociolinguistics, and subsequent activities are divided by course content area.

Sociolinguistics Introductory Exercise. Establishing a foundational association of factors affecting language interpretation can be introduced conceptually using the following activity on ambiguous phrases in regular circulation, which is relatively easy to take for granted as communication of specific meaning. Interpreting language depends on various factors, such as sociocultural and political positioning, cultural influences, experience, personality, and more. Students can reflect on the following prompts for indefinite adverbs of frequency (Geeks for Geeks, 2023), responding independently to the prompts, and returning to the group to discuss language nuances, including implications of interpretation for communication.

1. If a *couple* is two, how many are *a lot* ____, *many* ____ *several* ____, *a few* ____?
2. Which occurs the least? *Rarely, seldomly, or nearly never?* _____.
3. You are asked to pick up something that is "*not expensive.*" What is the most amount of money you expect to spend? _____.
4. How far is "*not far*" away*?* What is the furthest distance you expect to travel walking? driving? Or flying? _____.
5. When someone says, "Let's get lunch *sometime*." Do you (a) open your planner, (b) wait for follow-through, or (c) question if the conversation was politely ended? _____.

In a large group setting, the instructor invites students to share interpretations of indefinite adverbs and justify their reasoning, which may vary widely. Instructors prompt smaller group discussions, inquiring about contextual influences such as: What external or internal factors influenced your interpretation of these phrases (e.g., socioeconomic status, setting, demographics past experiences)? How might the relationship to the speaker affect interpretation (e.g., friend, leader, service provider, stranger)? What role might tone play in message interpretation? How might differences in meaning interpretation impact meaningful interactions? In what ways might counselors ensure that clients understand their intended meanings?

Inviting students to reflect on and collaborate on messages received through language use increases awareness that helps balance power dynamics that may be classroom barriers. Increasing students' awareness of interpretive variability of differing social perspectives can facilitate student curiosity and contribute to a more inclusive and respectful classroom environment. Approaching conceptual learning through nonconfrontational content, such as indefinite adverbs, reduces fragility responses that interfere with learning when engaging racialized discussions. Instructors can emphasize the role of social, political, and cultural components involved in meaning-making to connect knowledge transferable to social justice skill development. It may be helpful to emphasize to students that the discussion of language use from a sociolinguistic perspective does not center on "political correctness" but instead on empathy and cultural humility as a "way of being" (Zhu et al., 2021, p. 80) that requires self-awareness and a commitment to attending to clients' experiences.

Inclusive Case Studies. One way to integrate cultural competence training throughout the program curriculum is by adapting case studies, a learning tool used in most courses, to include cultural components. Exploring sociolinguistic and culturally responsive strategies can be included in assignment instructions, and evaluation criteria can require reflection on the client's cultural background and language use. For example, when working with a Jewish client, it is necessary to be mindful when referencing faith doctrine. Conflating Jewish sacred texts with the Bible or referring to the Jewish scriptures as the Old Testament centralizes the dominant Christian faith in the United States as superior, marginalizing the Jewish religion. Reflecting on sociolinguistic considerations in case examples can help students avoid inadvertently disrespecting a client's tradition in session.

Another example is when working with immigrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking clients. The counselor needs to be aware of the impact of specific terms such as *illegal* and *alien*, as well as assumptions about documentation. These terms, commonly used in the news media, normalize negative stereotypes about foreign-born populations. These terms can reinforce societal prejudices and convey a dehumanizing message to the client, undermining therapeutic progress.

Multicultural Counseling. An ethnographic assignment, common in MC courses, usually involves researching a social population in America and its subgroups, with criteria for reporting sociocultural history, demographic and sociopolitical information, a reflection on personal biases, and treatment recommendations. A sociolinguistic learning component may include criteria for consideration of subtle insults and acts of aggression the client group may face and their

implications for mental health and wellness (see Holmes, 2018). From an andragogical perspective, students learn specific stereotypical trait identifiers associated with the population, and this increased awareness of words and phrases that may harm clients can inform their practice. Promoting sociolinguistic awareness improves sensitivity to clients' experiences for culturally responsive care and reduces opportunities for ruptures to the alliance from unintentional aggressing (Yeo & Torres-Harding, 2021). Advanced training may also include responsive broaching techniques.

Helping Relationships. Students can create a script for initial client introductions, including ethically required content, which is typically followed by partner practice role-play. The assignment could be enhanced with additional discussion prompts exploring the effectiveness of the introduction with different clients, considering sociocultural perspectives. For example, students could consider: *How well does the language of the introduction statement present counseling immediacy for client populations that may respond best to this approach?*

Skills and Techniques. Lessons on summary restatement of presenting problems can consider sociolinguistic and cultural implications related to interactions of client intersectional identities. Counselors must be aware of their word choice to not unconsciously repeat familiar descriptors when restating or summarizing with clients. Counselor trainees are encouraged to reflect on the client's social location before the session begins, considering what is known from the intake information and what the client may have previously shared. Students are cautioned not to make assumptions about a client perception, but to utilize multiple sources of information, remain open, and attend to cues from the client. For example, news coverage and commentary may label the events of civil disturbance turned violent as *riots*, normalizing this term, while coverage of the same events from a different lens may label the events as a *community uprising*. Consider Cal:

> *Case example:* Cal is a White, 38-year-old, bisexual female working in law enforcement who presented for counseling with traumatic stress following an injury on the job while peacekeeping at a community protest that escalated to violence.

When summarizing this traumatic experience, the counselor is aware that using terms such as "political unrest" and "community uprising" may be seen by Cal as dismissive of the real danger they faced when they were injured. The counselor should listen to how Cal describes the event; if Cal uses the term *riot*, the counselor can reflect this language back. Suppose Cal's language does not reveal their positionality. In that case, the counselor can broach the subject with humility by asking Cal how they perceived the events or how they are affected by terms used to describe the events.

Human nature tends toward outlets characteristic of their perspectives, which can limit exposure to other perspectives and descriptive language. Counselors must be aware of embedded messages in language and intentionally seek to understand multiple perspectives to avoid unintentionally imposing on the client. For example, consider the case of Daniel:

> *Case example:* Daniel, a 17-year-old cisgender Black male student, presented with hopelessness following the same events, having protested injustice with his community. Daniel shared disappointment with the media's focus on violent actors rioting.

For some, the term *riot* centers on the outcome of violence, which obscures why community members were motivated to come together in civil protest. Daniel's stated disappointment with the media coverage focused on violence may suggest he feels the media bypassed the purpose of peaceful protesters to bring attention to the severity and pervasiveness of racial injustices. Even without this intention, this term may associate the counselor with social or political alignments that are unrepresentative or in opposition to his needs. Daniel may question the counselor's willingness or capacity to differentiate him from outside actors whose intent to create violence was beyond his

control. Without counselor insight, a therapeutic alliance may not develop.

Daniel's comment may also signify something else entirely, making it crucial for the counselor to resist assumptions and explore meaning collaboratively with the client. Counselors in training must practice skills to become comfortable with broaching and discussing client perspectives. The assignment rubric can include additional evaluative criteria, such as broaching with the client and awareness of and sensitivity to the client's descriptive language.

Supervision. Identifying a client's underlying therapeutic issues demands empathetic attunement — an advanced clinical skill that matures through years of clinical training and practical experience (Fox et al., 2016). Institutions of higher education often mirror the dominant cultural expectations in the classroom, frequently not accounting for the wide range of perspectives reflective of the students; cultural influences within the classroom setting can significantly affect the learning outcomes. Field training courses and supervisory experiences can be instrumental in fostering inclusive attitudes toward diverse students. Despite inadvertently overlooking injustices that diverge from prevailing cultural views in the classroom, supervision is a space where supervisors can directly meet students' cultural needs and model cultural humility for supervisees, which directly influences students' clinical applications and can shape students' understanding of sociolinguistic implications and cultural values with clients.

Consider the case of international students, who often are affected by sociolinguistic barriers due to English-specific training experiences (Garrison et al., 2022). Such barriers can hinder students' ability to fully demonstrate their clinical acumen. Supervisors can help these students overcome barriers to thrive in their clinical training by showing genuine curiosity and understanding, exploring and validating students' linguistic identity, and affirming their strengths (Garrison et al., 2022). A safer learning environment enables students to focus on developing clinical skills with clients by alleviating common barriers.

Conclusion

This article underscores the significance of sociolinguistic awareness and humility in culturally responsive counseling. It stresses the distinction between cultural competence and mere absence of known prejudice, emphasizing the active engagement required to understand and appreciate diverse cultural perspectives and the need for counselors to be aware of interpretive meaning and sociocultural implications imbued through words. Effective communication and trust are essential to the alliance between counselors and clients. The language used in counseling has a significant role in conveying empathy and establishing a shared understanding (Day-Vines et al., 2021; Gundel et al., 2020). Developing a shared language can enhance the therapeutic relationship and promote client growth. Because language can positively and negatively impact the therapeutic relationship, it is necessary to consider the influence of social contexts on the counselor and the client during counseling training programs, including exploring language implications from various sociolinguistic perspectives.

Counselor training involves a willingness to engage in difficult conversations confronting deeply held values and beliefs. Educators can support students by fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, creating a container in the classroom for students to explore feelings of anger and defensiveness where they are empowered to ask questions that challenge their assumptions. Educators modeling culturally and linguistically responsive practices in their interactions with students demonstrate the importance of working within the client's worldview experientially, alongside the client, not from an outsider's perspective but through the client's value system, to foster a therapeutic alliance built on respect, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to acknowledging and valuing unique individual experiences and identities without imposing external standards. Counseling within the client's worldview is not just a semantic exercise but an ethical imperative requiring a knowledge

base, a curiosity, and a grounding in counseling theory. Counselors must recognize their communication as self-disclosures of their social positioning that can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate systemic biases. Sociolinguistic awareness emerges as a cornerstone of MCC for fostering trust in the therapeutic relationship. Counselors understanding the intricate interplay between language, culture, and identity can curate an environment where their clients do not have to code-switch for them but can feel supported, understood, and valued. Through ongoing education, self-reflection, and a commitment to cultural humility, counselors can collaboratively navigate linguistic dynamics and promote positive therapeutic outcomes for clients from diverse backgrounds.

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