

From Admissions to Graduation: An Analysis of a Social Justice Infused Masters-Level Counseling Program

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Abstract. Researchers assessed the impacts of a social justice-infused masters-level counseling program ($N = 210$) over a five-year period. A social justice-infused masters-level counseling program is defined as a program that teaches social justice concepts as the focal point of each class, with the counseling content being gleaned through that lens. Social justice is not an afterthought in coursework but rather the primary focus. Impacts were assessed using the *Intercultural Development Inventory*. Results offer useful data that could inform other counseling programs looking to assess students' overall intercultural, cultural, or multicultural counseling competence throughout their programs.

Keywords: counseling, social justice, multicultural counseling, antiracism, cultural competence



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Introduction

Multicultural competence and social justice advocacy are central to the counseling profession and the overall preparation of counselors-in-training (Hilert et al., 2022; American Counseling Association, 2014). While both the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC; Sue et al., 1992) and the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MCSJCC) (Ratts et al., 2016) serve as strong frameworks for counselor educator programs, limited research remains focused on how counselor education programs should incorporate the competencies into curriculum in a way that ensures a comprehensive infusion across courses, rather than a focus on one or two courses (Ratts et al., 2016).

Over the past two decades, the body of counseling literature focused on pedagogical approaches to enhancing multicultural and social justice counseling competence in master's level students has increased significantly (Estrada & Rigali-Oiler, 2016; Hipolito Delgado et al., 2011; Hoover & Morrow, 2016; Seward, 2014), yet, examples of how to do so in a variety of counseling courses beyond the multicultural counseling course and throughout counselor education programs from the first semester to the last semester remain scarce. While the counseling profession has acknowledged and prioritized multicultural and social justice competence as a cornerstone of the field, more specificity is needed on how counselor educators can successfully do so (Ratts et al., 2016).

Multicultural competence and social justice advocacy training varies vastly by program, in part because of the flexibility in the delivery and interpretation of the competencies, which makes it challenging to ensure that all counselors will be trained similarly, no matter the program (Hilert, et al., 2022; Lorell, Atkins, & Michel, 2021). With no intentionally clear direction on implementation of the multicultural and social justice advocacy training, that involves engaged emotional work, the chances of resistance to change among counselors in training and faculty/supervisors may continue to impede progress in this area (Celinska & Swazo, 2016). This can be problematic, as the urgency for counselors in various settings to counsel increasingly diverse populations while serving as social

justice advocates for clients continues to increase (Medvide, 2022; Pieterse, 2009). Furthermore, a more intentional focus on social justice advocacy in counselor education programs continues to show up in the literature, though clear approaches to how to incorporate advocacy related experiences and activities in the classroom continue to develop (Medvide, 2022). Killian and Floren (2019) found counselors in training engaged in pedagogy that provided direct exposure and self-reflective work at many course levels enhanced multicultural and social justice growth. According to Sue and Sue (2016), the sole focus on multicultural competence in counselor training absent from social justice advocacy will serve as insufficient if counselors fail to gain an awareness of the role that power, privilege, and oppression plays in the lives of their students or clients (Hooks et al., 2016; Medvide, 2022; Rothman, Malott, & Paone, 2012). Similarly, pedagogical practices should also include topics of racial and ethnic inequities, broaching conversations about social identities, race, power, and privilege differentials, along with advocacy skill-building (Day-Vines, Bryan, & Griffin, 2013; Hipolito-Delgado & Reinders-Saeman, 2017).

When considering the infusion of multiculturalism and social justice beyond the one multicultural counseling course, some research exists about the infusion into practicum and internship courses (Fickling et al., 2019; Field et al., 2019); however, literature that discusses the importance of infusion as early as a student's first semester coursework (e.g., Introduction to Counseling, Counseling Theory, Ethics in Counseling) remains limited (Medvide, 2022; Motulsky, 2014). What is also missing in the counseling literature are the methods used to measure the overall multicultural counseling and social justice competence of counseling students at various times throughout their programs of study. Topics throughout the literature premise the social justice infused program (e.g., Day-Vines et al., 2018; Hipolito-Delgado & Reinders-Saeman, 2017; Hooks et al., 2016; King et al., 2018; Malott & Schaeffle, 2015; Novakovic et al., 2020; Ratts et al., 2016; Rothman et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2020; Sue, 2006; Zhu et al., 2020). When measuring how effective a social justice-infused program is in supporting multicultural and social justice competencies, an absence of tools was present. This provided researchers the opportunity to observe graduate students throughout their program and assess how progress was being made through the multifaceted concept of intercultural or multicultural competence.

Intercultural or multicultural competence is the capability to shift perspectives and adapt behavior to cultural differences and commonality, reflecting in the degree and ability to effectively bridge values, expectations, beliefs (IDI LLC., 2020). People are not alike in their capabilities to recognize and effectively respond to cultural differences and commonalities. This framework is based on the intercultural development continuum (IDC) which assists people in where to begin their own work. Modified from the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986). The IDC identifies five orientations including denial, polarization, minimization, acceptance, and adaptation (ID LLC., 2020). When one can more deeply understand learned differences, they can act on this increased insight in culturally appropriate and positive ways. When transitioning from the results from the IDC, participants often come from one of two mindsets.

A monocultural mindset is an understanding of cultural differences and commonalities based on one's own cultural values and practices (IDI LLC., 2020). This results in broad stereotypes to identify cultural differences and less complex perceptions and experiences of cultural differences and similarities. On the other hand, multicultural or intercultural mindset allows for an understanding of cultural differences and commonalities based on one's own and other culture's values and practices (IDI LLC., 2020). This results in cultural generalizations to recognize cultural differences and more complex perceptions and experiences, thus exhibiting multicultural competence.

This study culminated in recording IDC scores at the beginning and end of the fully infused multicultural and social justice program. Allowing students to see their results and dissect them as they progressed into the program was a rare opportunity. Having students take the IDC at the beginning and end of the program allows for an enriching experience for students and an experimental glance into the effectiveness of multicultural and social justice competencies.

Method

Researchers. The researchers identified as a White female professor, a Black male professor, and a Biracial Latina female professor, all counselor educators. All professors teach various courses within the multicultural and social infused justice-infused master-level program and have completed

extensive research and publications on racial identity development, multicultural counseling, and racism. The researchers' ages ranged from 44 to 53.

Participants. Participants were educational counseling students in a 48-credit masters-level CACREP accredited counseling program from a small, predominantly White University in the Northeastern part of the United States. Data sets were gathered over a five-year period (2018-2023). All participants were either in school counseling or student affairs/college counseling tracks. Participants were in a social justice-infused program, participating in courses focused on multicultural and social justice competencies. A total of 210 participants completed all components of the data, of whom 10% identified as male ($n = 21$) and 90% as female ($n = 189$). Racially, 82% identified as White ($n = 172$), 7% identified as Black ($n = 14$), 10% identified as Latinx ($n = 22$), and 1% identified as Asian ($n = 2$). Participants identified ranging in age between 22 and 35 years. Programmatically, 75% ($n = 158$) were in the school counseling track, and 25% ($n = 52$) were in the student affairs/college counseling track.

A subset of all participants, 35% ($n = 74$), completed IDI both before and after the fully infused multicultural and social justice program, of whom 14% identified as male ($n = 10$) and 86% as female ($n = 64$). The following was the racial categorization for this group: 87% White ($n = 64$), 5% Black ($n = 4$), 7% Latinx ($n = 5$), and 1% Asian ($n = 1$). Of this subset, 73% ($n = 54$) and 27% ($n = 20$) were enrolled in the school counseling and student affairs/college counseling tracks, respectively.

Intervention. All participants were enrolled in a CACREP-accredited master-level counseling program of 48 credits. Participants experienced a social justice-infused program, starting with admissions, through all coursework, to graduation. The Multicultural & Social Justice Counseling competencies have framed the coursework in many ways. The core faculty led and completed a thorough curriculum review to assess and intentionally incorporate the MCCSJC in all courses, similar to the CACREP process. Through that process, all program faculty were guided through a critical review of each course's content to better address inequities and access issues in counseling. Core counseling content areas (e.g., ethics, theory, career, assessment) were reconstructed to address advocacy by way of MCCSJC, specifically focusing on systemic barriers for clients at the K-16 levels. The incorporation of MSJCC competencies and additional program requirements far exceed the minimum expectations of counseling program practices (CACREP, 2016). Some examples include social justice and antiracist statements that frame the program from initial application through graduation; an advanced race & racism course that requires students to participate in an 'outside of the classroom' university-wide antiracism project; immersive social justice advocacy and action opportunities during the minimum 700-hour field experiences in k-16 settings; implicit bias assessments, immersive bias-disruption experiences, and social justice activities throughout each course.

Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Participants took the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; Hammer, 2011; IDI LLC, 2020; Wiley, 2016) to assess for intercultural (or multicultural) competence, particularly the ability to alter cultural perspectives and adjust behaviors to cultural similarities and differences. The IDI is a fifty-item scale that measures individuals' placement along the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC), which describes orientations toward cultural differences ranging from the more monocultural mindsets of denial and polarization through the transitional orientation of minimization to the intercultural or multicultural mindsets of acceptance and adaptation (IDI LLC, 2020). Scores produced are the perceived orientation (PO), the developmental orientation (DO), and the orientation gap (OG).

The perceived orientation (PO) reflects where participants place themselves along the intercultural development continuum (IDC) and how they see themselves interacting with culturally diverse individuals and groups. The perceived orientation can be either denial (i.e., $55 \leq \text{PO-Score} < 70$), polarization (i.e., $70 \leq \text{PO-Score} < 85$), minimization (i.e., $85 \leq \text{PO-Score} < 115$), acceptance (i.e., $115 \leq \text{PO-Score} < 130$), or adaptation (i.e., $130 \leq \text{PO-Score} < 145$). Perceived orientation scores are typically higher than developmental orientations.

The developmental orientation (DO) indicates a participant's primary alignment toward cultural differences and commonalities along the IDC as assessed by the IDI. The DO is the perspective most likely used in situations where cultural differences and commonalities need to be bridged. Similar to the perceived orientation, the developmental orientation can be denial, polarization, minimization, acceptance, or adaptation.

The orientation gap (OG) is the difference along the IDC between your perceived orientation (PO) and developmental orientation (DO). The larger the gap, the more likely a participant is to overestimate effectiveness in bridging cultural differences. Secondly, the larger the orientation gap, the more likely a participant is caught off-guard by the discrepancy between PO and DO scores.

A PO score that is higher than the DO score indicates an overestimation of intercultural or multicultural competence, revealing a participant who believes they are more adaptive to cultural differences than they likely are. A DO score that is higher than the PO score indicates an underestimation of intercultural competence, revealing a participant who believes they are less adaptive to cultural differences than they likely are. A PO score that matches the DO score indicates a participant with an accurate representation of how they adapt to cultural differences. Increasing intercultural competence begins by reflecting on the gap between the PO and DO scores to establish where to focus efforts in increasing multicultural competency.

Both the PO and DO include five subscales: denial, polarization, minimization, acceptance, and adaptation. The denial orientation recognizes more observable cultural differences (e.g., food) but may not notice more profound cultural differences (e.g., conflict resolution styles) and may avoid or withdraw from such differences. Polarization orientation views cultural differences in terms of “us” and “them,” ranging from an uncritical view toward one’s own cultural values coupled with a critical view toward other cultural values (defense) to a critical orientation toward one’s own cultural values and an uncritical view toward other cultural values (reversal). The minimization orientation highlights cultural commonality and universal principles that may mask deeper recognition and appreciation of cultural differences. Acceptance orientation recognizes and appreciates patterns of cultural difference and commonality in one’s own and other cultures. Adaptation orientation can shift cultural perspectives and change behavior in culturally appropriate and authentic ways (IDI LLC., 2020).

The IDI has been thoroughly evaluated through research to ensure that the results are generalizable to a large, unique population of individuals (IDI LLC, 2020). Specifically, the IDI has been tested using rigorous psychometric criteria and has been established as both a valid and reliable instrument for measuring intercultural competence (Hammer, 2011; Wiley, 2016). Furthermore, the IDI has strong content validity due to its development using the voices and experiences of a diverse pool of individuals (Hammer, 2011; Hammer et al., 2003; Wiley, 2016). As it relates to this study, prior research using the IDI has indicated a strong predictive ability in organizations and educational institutions in measuring goals connected to understanding and improving cross-cultural understanding in training (IDI LLC, 2020; Wiley, 2016).

Data Collection. The study protocol was approved through a university institutional review board. Participants took the IDI during their first enrolled course, Introduction to Professional Counseling, and during their final semester while enrolled in Internship 2. The timeframe between the pre and post-test measures was approximately two years.

Quantitative data were collected over the course of five years to determine if the infusion of multicultural counseling competencies throughout coursework influenced students' PO, DO, and OG. By analyzing students' results at the beginning and the end of their program, the research aims to show the effectiveness and prevalence of social justice and multicultural competencies through the subscales of IDI.

Results and Discussions

Prior to running the Dependent Samples T-test on the data, assumptions for this statistical test were checked. The difference between each participant’s PO, DO, and OG scores in pre- and post-inventories were computed; the Shapiro Wilk test was run with SPSS to check the normality expectations. Based on the findings about the assumptions, the differences in each of the dependent variables between the pre-and post-inventories are normally distributed (Table 1). The distributions of the differences also did not reveal any extreme outliers.

Table 2 shows the distribution of participants’ PO and DO orientations before and after the program. 16% of the participants (n = 12) improved their PO orientation from *acceptance* to *adaptation* after the program. 8% of participants (n = 6) were categorized with *adaptation* both before and after the program. 5% of the participants (n = 4) receded their PO orientation for one level from either *adaptation* to *acceptance* or from *acceptance* to *minimization* with the completion of the program

Table 1. Findings from Shapiro Wilk test for the Normality Assumption

Variables	W-value	P-value
Change in PO Scores from Pre- to Post-Test	0.971	0.082
Change in DO Scores from Pre- to Post-Test	0.971	0.087
Change in OG Scores from Pre- to Post-Test	0.974	0.133

Table 2. Distribution of IDI Categories

	Before the Program (n = 74)		After the Program (n = 74)	
	PO	DO	PO	DO
Denial	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)
Polarization	0 (0%)	11 (15%)	0 (0%)	7 (9%)
Minimization	2 (3%)	56 (76%)	4 (5%)	49 (66%)
Acceptance	65 (88%)	7 (9%)	53 (72%)	16 (22%)
Adaptation	7 (9%)	0 (0%)	17 (23%)	0 (0%)

12% (n = 9) and 9% (n =7) of the participants improved their DO orientation from *minimization* to *acceptance* and from *polarization* to *minimization*, respectively, with the completion of the program. On the other hand, 7% (n = 5) and 3% (n = 2) of the participants receded their DO orientation for one level, from *acceptance* to *minimization* and from *minimization* to *polarization*, respectively, with the completion of the program. 3% (n = 2) of the participants also receded their DO orientation from *polarization* to *denial* at the end of the study.

As the assumptions were met, a series of Dependent Samples T-tests were run and found the following results (Table 3). Findings from the dependent samples t-tests showed that participants significantly increased their PO and DO scores from pre- to post-inventories ($t(73) = 3.869, p < 0.01$; $t(73) = 2.331, p < 0.023$, respectively). The mean PO score increased from 122.7 to 125.2 at the end of the program. Similarly, the mean DO score increased from 97.9 to 101.8 at the end of the program. These significant increases in PO and DO scores also indicated medium ($d = 0.45$) and small ($d = 0.27$) effect sizes. These findings reveal that the social justice-based counseling program statistically significantly improved cross-cultural understanding and enhanced the intercultural and multicultural competence of the participating students.

Table 3. Dependent Samples T-Test Findings

	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	t-value	df	p-value (two-sided)	Cohen d Effect Size
PO Score	122.68	125.22	3.869	73	< 0.01**	0.45
DO Score	97.86	101.76	2.331	73	0.023*	0.27
OG Score	24.81	23.46	-1.285	73	0.203	0.15

*p-values are significant, lower than 0.05; **p-values are significant and lower than 0.01.

Discussion. This study sought to determine the impact of infusing the multicultural counseling competencies to students’ perception of their own cultural awareness and presences of biases as they move throughout a social justice-infused master’s-level counseling program. Results indicated that measuring subscales included in the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) at the beginning of the program promotes a higher level of preparedness to deal with topics of social justice and advocacy. Allowing students to self-assess their own subscales (Denial, Polarization, Minimization, Acceptance,

and Adaptation) creates a more collaborative and self-dependent perspective on their own education. Furthermore, having students take the IDI at the end of their program reinstates their continued progress in multicultural competency by reflecting their journey in a socially-just counseling program. In an ever-evolving world, the need for counselors to be interculturally or multiculturally competent and comfortable with all aspects of social justice, advocacy, racism, and inequities is crucial to providing counseling services to those they serve.

The benefits of an IDI assessment prior to entrance into a social justice-infused master's-level program is an effective way to center cultural competence, social justice and advocacy at the forefront of the educational dialogue. Students come from diverse backgrounds and disciplines when beginning a master's-level program, hence an IDI score creates a baseline for all counseling students to grow and evolve into effective counselors as a result of their own personal experiences (Zhu et al., 2021).

In addition, the results of this five-year intentionally infused multicultural and social justice advocacy focused counseling curriculum study aligned with the limited number of studies that highlighted the enhanced level of multicultural and social justice growth for students as a result of direct exposure and self-reflective work at every course level of a program (Celinska & Swazo, 2016; Killian & Floren, 2019). The opportunity for students to attain baseline assessment scores and then be reassessed to affirm cross-cultural understanding, multicultural and intercultural competency as a result of their studies allows students to gain an appreciation for ongoing self-evaluation.

Graduate students who are able to view their perceived multicultural competence versus their actual multicultural competence can be a helpful viewpoint in which to begin a counseling program. When the emphasis of the program is complete immersion into antiracism, antibias, and social justice advocacy and action, the understanding and reality of one's competence are imperative. When students are provided not just the opportunity to be assessed, but meaningful, course by course work that allows them growth in confronting their personal biases, they are better able to become more aware of their perceived versus actual competence and work towards the higher level of competence. This can be done through the multiple ways throughout the program where students confront their own person biases (Dameron et al., 2020).

Limitations. This study included a small and convenient sample of participants from one particular counseling program and region of the United States, and thus generalization to other populations should be made with caution. Additionally, while the IDI assessment is a valid and reliable instrument that measures intercultural development on a continuum, it lacks a clear alignment with the counseling program's focus on social justice and multicultural counseling competence. Despite the lack of clear alignment, the researchers believed the IDI was the best instrument currently in existence to assist with program assessment. Furthermore, while the two-year pre and posttest gap is significant, the IDI assesses intercultural development on a continuum, which can take longer than two years.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study assessed the impacts of a social justice infused masters-level counseling program ($N = 210$) over a five-year period. Impacts were assessed through the *Intercultural Development Inventory* (IDI LLC, 2020). Data gleaned from this study showed meaningful results and exemplified the importance of measuring cultural competence and students' overall awareness of social justice and potential impacts of their biases from the start of their masters-level program through graduation. Further, IDI results allowed for student self-reflection at the start of their program, which played a role in their overall development as they moved through their program. While the IDI does not specifically address social justice and multicultural counseling competencies, results were helpful to overall program evaluation, which can inform future curriculum revisions. Despite any limitations, results from this study could serve as useful for other masters-level programs seeking to assess their student's overall cultural competence throughout their program.

Acknowledgments

None

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