



**North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)**  
PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404 \*\*\* Phone/Fax (tollfree): 888.426.4712  
Email: [info@nacsw.org](mailto:info@nacsw.org) \*\*\* Website: <http://www.nacsw.org>

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## **THE AFFECTIVE PROCESS OF MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

**By: Veronica L. Hardy, PhD, MSW**

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The Affective Process of Multicultural Competency Development:

An Exploratory Study

Veronica L. Hardy, PhD, MSW

University of North Carolina at Pembroke

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An Exploratory Study

*Introduction*

The increase of a racially and ethnically diverse population in the United States has called for the infusion of multicultural training across counselor education curricula (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1991; Kerl, 2002). Due to the accreditation standards stipulated by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), multicultural counseling is a critical component within counseling and psychology programs (Estrada, Durlak, & Juarez, 2002). Counselor education program content should consist of the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC), which includes three areas: knowledge of varying cultural worldviews as perceived by clients; skills that represent the ability to implement culturally appropriate counseling strategies; and awareness through self-reflection regarding one's personal assumptions, biases, and values (Collins & Pieterse, 2007; Worthington, Soth-McNett, & Moreno, 2007). Therefore, in response to the accreditation standards, counselor educators must adequately prepare counseling students to provide culturally informed services to a diverse clientele (Estrada et al.).

Social science research studies have yielded varying outcomes pertaining to student perception of program effectiveness and impact on competency development. Neville, Spanierman, and Doan (2006) conducted a study exploring the association between color-blind racial ideology and MCC. The findings supported previous assertions that this ideology is related to less consideration of racial and cultural factors in case conceptualizations. These results are further supported by a recent study exploring the impact of affective responses to racism on areas of self-reported, demonstrated, and observed MCC (Spanierman, Poteat, Wang, & Oh, 2008).

Reportedly, results showed that students with lower levels of color-blind racial attitudes had higher levels of compassionate costs (i.e., White empathy and guilt). Furthermore, empathy can be viewed as a construct that consists of both cognitive and affective components (Seto, Young, Becker, & Kiselica, 2006). A study exploring the impact of color-blindness on empathy showed that a low awareness of racial issues hinders one's "ability to empathize with clients, which may lead to decreased sensitivity to cultural issues in case conceptualization and client treatment" (Burkard & Knox, 2004, p. 394). Overall, these studies provide evidence for the role of affective reactions in the process of multicultural competency development.

Finally, a qualitative analysis (Hays, Dean, & Chang, 2007) was used to explore therapists' perceptions of how oppression and privilege were addressed in counselor training. Reportedly, large class size and lack of classroom safety were factors that inhibited feeling expression about oppression and privilege. In addition, study participants felt several challenging topics would have improved the training experience such as whether Christian therapists should counsel the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations. Participants also felt anger and confusion when educators were inactive during periods of discrimination in the classroom. In contrast, the reported strengths of course facilitation included the instructor's (a) willingness to engage in open dialogue, (b) advanced training in multicultural issues, and (c) minority status. Overall, students want to be in training experiences that extend beyond Western and European paradigms, address diversity beyond race, and include instructors who will challenge and assess student beliefs throughout training.

## *Theoretical Framework*

### *Emotions Theory*

As the aim of this study was to examine the impact of students' emotional reactions upon competency development, including theoretical frameworks is important (Creswell, 2003; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). According to previous research pertaining to emotions theory, emotions are considered as structures that either sustain or change a condition or situation (Miron, Parkinson, & Brehm, 2007). Furthermore, emotions are viewed as motivational factors that encourage individuals to "act in a special way, sometimes engaging other people, as when we are angry, and other times avoiding people or situations, as when we are sad or fearful" (Miron et al., p. 248). Therefore, such motivating factors lead individuals to organize and change behavior through either reacting or adapting to a situation (Miron et al.).

### *Constructivist Paradigm*

The constructivist paradigm emphasizes that knowledge develops according to the shared experiences of a group and is connected to the group of persons from which it emerged (Williams, 2006). Constructivism further states that reality "is a mental construction of the observer" (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, p. 319). Therefore, the student should understand that his or her observations of a culture, population, or situation is influenced and interpreted based on personal assumptions and preconceptions. As a result, it is important for counseling students to evaluate the assumptions they carry about culturally different populations in relation to their own cultural identity.

### *Purpose of Study*

The current study was designed to describe the expressed essences of meaning in doctoral-level, counseling students' lived experiences during their participation in an online

multicultural counseling course at a Mid-Atlantic university (Creswell, 2003). Through the perspectives of the phenomenological qualitative tradition, personal dimensions of identity (PDI) model, and consensual qualitative research (CQR) methodology, the focus was on discovering students' emotional reactions and their transitioning through the competency development experience.

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

A sample of nine participants ( $n = 9$ ) were randomly selected from a population ( $N = 22$ ) of doctoral-level counseling students who had recently completed an online multicultural counseling course at a Mid-Atlantic university. The geographically diverse sample of students consisted of 3 males and 6 females. The sample consisted of 2 African Americans, 5 European Americans, 1 Asian American, and 1 international student. The calculated range of the participants' ages 31 ( $M = 39.44$ ,  $SD = 9.12$ ). The participants described their religious/spiritual faith as Christian ( $n = 9$ ). The total number of participants ( $n = 9$ ) identified their primary sexual orientation as heterosexual. Six participants ( $n = 6$ ) were married; three participants ( $n = 3$ ) were not married.

#### *The Multicultural Counseling Course*

The course lasted 8 weeks and was conducted in an online format. Participation required technological competence, including e-mail and discussion board dialogue via an asynchronous classroom system. The course assignments also included a 35-hour cultural immersion experience designed for interaction with a culturally different population and self-exploration.

## *Measures*

*Demographic questionnaire.* Participants completed a 9-item demographic questionnaire in preparation for the interview. The questions elicited the following cultural identity information: age, gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, and religious/spiritual faith. In addition, the form requested the participant name and telephone number for researcher contact.

*Interview protocol.* Designed in a semistructured format, the questions assessed students' overall course experience, emotional reactions to the course phenomena, and perceptions of the course impact on multicultural competency. The questions were developed based on a thorough review of the MCC literature, expert feedback from those knowledgeable in CQR methodology and/or MCC research, and the instructional and student experiences of the principle investigator and research committee. The questions were piloted with three doctoral-level counseling students who were reflective of the study sample population. Based on results of the pilot interviews, the questions were modified. Finally, the interview was conducted over one session.

## *Procedures of Data Analysis*

The CQR method was used to assess the data (Hill et al., 2005). The process included the development of domains to group the data generated from each participant, the construction of core ideas to identify the main ideas expressed by participants, and cross-analysis to identify categories that were consistent across participants. This process occurred based on consensus by the researchers who discussed individual perceptions until agreement was reached for the final results. At the completion of the case analysis, the auditors reviewed the results to ensure that the raw data was in the correct domain, core ideas were a relevant reflection of pertinent material, and that the cross-analysis faithfully represented the data (Hill et al., 2005).

### *Results*

The qualitative results yielded 16 domains that reflect the participants' responses. First, the findings regarding the participants' perceptions of the multicultural competency development process and the impact of their cultural identity upon course participation are presented. Second, the impact of course components on competency level are presented. Third, student interactions within the online course environment are offered. In order to present the frequency of categories according to the CQR methodology, the following labels were applied: *general* (all cases), *typical* (at least half or more of the cases but not all), and *variant* (less than half of the cases but more than two; Hill et al., 1997). Finally, only general and typical category results will be presented within this article as variant categories were minimal and can be obtained through contact with the authors (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Domains, Categories, and Frequencies*

Domain	Category	Frequency
1. Multicultural competency definition	Understanding the culturally different person	Typical
	Skills application with a culturally different person	Typical
2. Student perception of general multicultural competency development process	Engagement in cross-cultural interactions	General
	Education and training	Typical
	Self-awareness, process, and maturity	Typical
3. Student perception of personal multicultural competency development history	Educational experiences	General
	Interactions with culturally different persons	Typical
4. Student motivation for course participation	Desire to learn about others	Typical
	Desire for personal growth, self-awareness, and self-expression	Typical
5. Perceived impact of cultural identity on course experiences	Self-awareness, level of openness, and willingness to learn	Typical

Domain	Category	Frequency
6. Emotional reactions to most impactful course components	Increased self-awareness	General
	Change in perception toward others	Typical
	Primarily impacted by immersion	Typical
	Experience	
7. The role of the discussion board in promoting competency	Awareness of perspectives and behaviors of others	Typical
	Self-awareness and processing of experiences and feelings	Typical
8. The role of the course reading materials and video in promoting competency	Internal emotional responses	Typical
	Change in thought process and enhanced learning	Typical
9. The role of the cultural immersion project in promoting competency	Change in thought process and enhanced learning	General
	Internal emotional responses	Typical
	External emotional responses	Typical
10. Level of satisfaction with racial and cultural discussion	Very or fairly satisfied with racial and cultural discussion	General
11. Perceived impact of course participation on change process	Increased interest and sensitivity toward culturally different populations	Typical
	Changed perception and feelings toward specific populations	Typical
	Increased self-awareness	Typical

Domain	Category	Frequency
12. Student interactions with course instructor	Level of challenge, objectivity, validation, and interaction	General
13. Student interactions with classmates	Cohesive experiences Challenging experiences	Typical
14. Challenges and stressors related to course participation	Course assignment requirements	General
15. Current effects of the course on students	Self-awareness and professional growth	General
16. Student advice for an online instructor	Immersion experience	Typical

#### *Multicultural Competency Definition*

The participants typically reported that the definition of multicultural competency consisted of understanding the culturally different person in addition to having knowledge of culturally appropriate counseling strategies. For example, a student stated that “multicultural competency relates to working effectively with people who are different from you. It goes beyond just head knowledge of concepts and theories but it relates directly to application.” A second student referred to multicultural competency as being “able to listen and hear clients” who are different from his cultural background and also possessing “the skill necessary” to “understand” and “validate” the client’s experience.

### *Student Perception of General Multicultural Competency Development Process*

The participants generally reported that multicultural competency develops through interactions with culturally different persons. One respondent identified the impact of one's social history and community upon competency through stating, "If you're in a kind of isolated or in a community that everybody is White middle class and has picket fences, then you don't really have any personal experience with people of diverse backgrounds." The student reflected on her upbringing in a diverse community, which fostered her interest in "getting to know" and "connect" with others and "wanting to learn about people and their backgrounds." Typically, the respondents also reported that factors such as education and training contribute to competency development. Furthermore, typical findings revealed that self-awareness, personal processing, and maturity are additional factors in competency development.

### *Student Perception of Personal Multicultural Competency Development History*

One general category emerged where the participants consistently reported that education was a primary factor in their history of competency development. The respondents primarily identified that participation in a master's-level counseling course exposed them to the term *multicultural competence* and promoted an awareness regarding this topic in counseling. A typical category also emerged regarding interactions with culturally different persons, which is consistent with participants' idea that such a factor is important toward competency development.

### *Student Motivation for Course Participation*

The typical categories that emerged for this domain included a desire to learn about others and a desire for personal growth, self-awareness, and self-expression. One student described herself as "still in the early stages of evolving as a counseling professional." Therefore,

she “approached the course from an attitude of I want to know myself better and I want to learn about others.” Another student felt her competency level “allowed me to be able to keep talking and to not give up and to not get angry and get silent when things were said that I didn’t understand or that frustrated me or that challenged me.”

#### *Perceived Impact of Cultural Identity on Course Experiences*

Typically, the participants felt that cultural identity impacted their process of self-awareness, level of openness, and willingness to learn throughout the course. One African-American participant felt “validated” in being able to express personal experiences with discrimination and racism. The participant further stated, “being able to share those and being able to be in a forum where I could share those where people cared to hear my story, that was really important to me.”

#### *Emotional Reactions to Most Impactful Course Components*

Generally, the respondents reported an increased self-awareness due to emotional responses during engagement with the course components. Typically, the participants referred to the cultural immersion project as the most impactful. For example, a participant identified her overall feelings toward the course components as humbleness, inner guilt for misconceptions toward different cultures, conviction, and excitement for realizing biases and myths that she had believed. The respondents also typically reported that they felt a change in their perceptions toward others. One student reported entering his immersion experience with prejudiced thoughts toward his immersion population that they “would be lower IQ, would be victims of drug use, alcohol abuse, or mental illness.” The student learned that there were different life circumstances that impacted the current situation of his immersion population that were different from his

assumptions. Upon this realization, he felt “sad and overwhelmed at just my own prejudices toward people” of the population.

#### *The Role of the Discussion Board in Promoting Competency*

The students typically reported that the discussion boards promoted an awareness of perspectives and behaviors of others. One participant reported a period of difficult dialogue on the discussion board with a classmate after the student revealed personal thoughts. The participant felt that the experience was “hurtful” and that “it was disappointing that maybe as a group of counseling students we talk about inviting honesty and vulnerability and maybe struggle to practice that among each other at times.” The respondents also typically reported increased self-awareness and the processing of experiences and feelings due to discussion board interactions. One student felt it was positive to see self-growth and also to “be able to watch our classmates grow,” which helped to “enrich” her experience.

#### *The Role of the Course Reading Materials and Video in Promoting Competency*

The respondents typically reported that they experienced a change in thought process, enhanced learning, and emotional responses to the materials. One student felt the articles “were quite thought provoking” as she “had not reflected on myself as a White person.” She reported being “fascinated about someone who is Black or yellow or something else but wasn’t really thinking what it means to be White.” The student further stated, “that was the first time I was face-to-face with my Whiteness and my first reaction was this just is not fair. I didn’t choose to be White. Why am I getting all this response from people of other color?” She identified this as her “pride talking” or “defensiveness.” Therefore, in reading the articles, she felt that she had transitioned “from anger to sadness.” The student also identified feelings of disappointment, being “misunderstood,” “hurt and broken,” and felt “as a White person it wasn’t happy reading.”

The student further stated, “there is pain that heals and I believe that the pain experienced in reading those articles was very healing.”

#### *The Role of the Cultural Immersion Project in Promoting Competency*

A general category emerged as the students identified a change in thought process and enhanced learning. Typically, the students experienced emotional reactions that aided in a change in thought processes. One student identified feeling more “caring and more loving” toward the immersion population in addition to feeling “a lot of sadness, this feeling of vicarious traumatization” by the difficult circumstances of the immersion population. Furthermore, one student described the experience as “enlightening, encouraging, inspiring” and “challenging just in the way as far as how I was received because I was coming from a place of wanting to understand and connect and learn and my whole purpose being there.”

#### *Level of Satisfaction with Racial and Cultural Discussion*

Generally, students were very or fairly satisfied with racial and cultural discussion throughout the course. One student reported, “because the questions and reading materials resonated with us, we were much more motivated to contribute to the discussions and participate more.” Another respondent also stated that “the instructor invited openness, greatly. [The instructor] invited us to talk no matter White or African American or something else, she invited us to talk and process.”

#### *Perceived Impact of Course Participation on Change Process*

This domain yielded three typical categories in reference to the change process the students experienced. First, students reported an increased interest and sensitivity toward culturally different persons. One student stated previous experiences enabled him to be more open during the course to the experiences of others such as, “being willing to look at my own

culture and its effect on the history of our country.” The second category that emerged was a changed perception and feelings toward other populations. One student felt his change occurred through immersion and, “having to get out of my comfort zone . . . getting into their world. Then dealing with the discomfort that I have puts me in touch with the discomfort that they have . . . in my office as a counselor.” The third category that emerged was increased self-awareness. Due to the course experience, a student reported, “I became more aware of ways in which I . . . maybe invalidate somebody else’s experience or . . . validate their experience.”

#### *Student Interactions with Course Instructor*

Generally, the findings showed that the instructor presented characteristics such as challenging students, objectivity, validation, and consistent interaction that enhanced the course experience for the students. One student referred to the instructor as a “good guide” during the multicultural competency development process. A second student reported that the instructor was “always . . . available to answer questions and facilitate growth.”

#### *Student Interactions with Classmates*

There were two typical categories that emerged regarding student interactions. The first focused on the experiences that contributed to the cohesion within the group. One participant identified an experience as “even if we seem to misunderstand one another, we didn’t stop the dialogue, that it kept going until we could reach a place where we understood one another even if we didn’t agree.” Respondents also reported incidents that were challenging and primarily occurred during discussion board interactions. For example, there were incidents where students may have shared their feelings regarding certain populations they may have difficulty providing professional counseling services to and “some people brought their religious beliefs and came across to other people as being really judgmental and kind of condemning.”

### *Challenges and Stressors Related to Course Participation*

One general category emerged regarding course-related challenges and stressors. The respondents primarily expressed difficulty in coordinating the immersion experience, concern in fulfilling the 35-hour requirement within an 8-week summer session. In order to cope with the stressor of the “logistics” of locating immersion activities “and getting 35 hours in a short summer session,” a student reported coping methods such as “some weeks I just checked out. I just did the bare minimum.” The student further stated, “I wouldn’t say that I was fully present each moment and each activity of the course but overall I was.”

### *Current Effects of the Course on Students*

A general category emerged regarding student self-awareness and professional growth. Overall, the respondents reported that course participation currently affects self-awareness as one student stated she has been thinking more in terms of her culture, who she identifies with, continued exploration of her competency level, and methods to enhance that level of competency. Another student reported that she experiences a level of anxiety “when I work with a client that’s different from me, the anxiety doesn’t go away but at least being aware that it’s there and trying my best not to let it be a hindrance to connect with them.” The student further stated, “Self-awareness, definitely something I took away from the class by participating in it.”

### *Student Advice for an Online Instructor*

Typically, students stated that the cultural immersion project should remain as a course component. As one student stated, “it was helpful for us to do the immersion experience, that part I would not trade for anything.” Another student recommended extending the course to 15 weeks, which “would stretch the process and stretch the immersion experience a little more.”

## *Discussion*

The use of a qualitative method generated in-depth data from counseling students that can inform teaching strategies and explore the affective experiences that impact learning (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996; Worthington et al., 2007). In addition, as the field of professional counseling is guided by evidence-based practice and resulting theory, it is critical to explore the process of competency development and affective change within a theoretical framework. Therefore, the following discussion includes three major study results, implications for practice and theory, study limitations, and suggestions for future research.

### *Emotional Reactions to Most Impactful Course Components*

The participants perceived the experiential component of the cultural immersion project as the most effective aspect of the course requirements. This is also important as students described exposure and experience with other cultures as a key factor in the competency development process. This theme is reflective of competency standards that state culturally skilled counselors are to have consistent involvement with diverse populations beyond the academic and counseling settings (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Such experiences reportedly enabled the participants to recognize biases and process the impact of interactions with the culturally different population. In addition, students identified emotional reactions to this experience, including guilt, anger, humbleness, compassion, rejection, gratitude, anxiety, and inspiration. Their reaction with such feelings led to increased self-awareness as students reflected on the triggering events and reasons why such feelings occurred. Based on the findings in this study, a recommendation to promote further processing of triggers and emotional reactions during the immersion project is to implement the use of a reflective journal (Kerl, 2002; Mio & Barker-Hackett, 2003). The reflective journal could be used by the student to determine how to

cope with such responses during the counseling session and to address and process the responses with the client.

#### *Student Interactions with Classmates*

As the participants found certain characteristics of the instructor to be beneficial within the learning environment, another significant aspect to create classroom safety is the type of interactions with classmates. As noted by Ancis (1998), students may be reluctant to share initial thoughts during class due to the concept that the counseling profession is absent of biases. As a result, the instructor must promote a safe environment for student expression. Students typically identified two categories representing cohesive and challenging experiences with classmates. The participants were able to identify student interactions as “positive” and “very respectful . . . everyone was taking a risk in some of the things that they shared, there was a lot of affirmation and validation. That created a nurturing, a healing environment.”

In contrast, participants also reported challenging interactions that contributed to feelings of “tension” and the desire to “pull back” during discussions. Furthermore, certain students engaged in discussions by addressing classmates’ comments according to their religious perceptions. This was viewed as a challenging aspect of the course for those who were sharing personal insights and were confronted based on the religious identity of another classmate. Furthermore, gender-related misunderstandings occurred, “heated” discussions pertaining to homosexuality, and a feeling of a lack of relationship due to the online environment. Therefore, the following recommendations include methods to enhance the feeling of safety and relationship within the online classroom.

First, the instructor may implement therapeutic factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) that promote a productive group environment. Second, the students can share any concerns they have

regarding the topics to be addressed in the course. Third, discussion can be promoted to explore group norms and rules for communication, such as how to ask questions about culturally sensitive topics. Fourth, students can identify their expectations of the instructor when “harsh” encounters may take place on the discussion board. Fifth, as the students transition through the course, the instructor could schedule debriefing sessions to take place in the live classroom also complemented by a session at the end of the course to explore final thoughts.

#### *Student Advice for an Online Instructor*

As this investigation has also sought to explore the experience of participating in an online course, students provided recommendations that may enhance course facilitation and cohesion. These recommendations include (a) acknowledge and discuss national and international issues to increase students’ multicultural knowledge base and extend beyond a Westernized pattern of thinking, (b) implement increased verbal and face-to-face interactions within the course that allow students to process emotionally challenging reading materials, (c) use methods to stimulate full participation on discussion boards that will decrease “silence” and misunderstandings when emotionally challenging topics are discussed and strategies to intervene when students have “harsh” exchanges, (d) develop learning opportunities that allow students to creatively contribute to their own learning process, (e) ensure students have a “good support system” to aid with emotional reactions stimulated by the cultural immersion experience, (f) maintain consistent contact with students to ensure course content is not becoming emotionally overwhelming, and (g) increase the use of practical application exercises. Overall, these recommendations may be applied by counselor educators in future curricula to enhance student learning.

## *Implications for Theory: Emotions Theory and Constructivist Paradigm*

### *Emotions Theory*

As asserted by Consedine, Strongman, and Magai (2003), “the properties of the stimulus and situation have profound influences on overt behavior” (p. 883). In addition, the emotions aid to sustain the behaviors that are “necessary for coping with the most important event at a given moment” (p. 250). As an example, one participant noted the experience of “vicarious traumatization,” “guilt,” and “shame” due to previous prejudicial assumptions toward the population. As consistent with the assumption of the stimulus, emotions, behavior system, the immersion experience prompted the motivating emotions for a change in behavior, which consisted of developing a different view of the immersion population.

The findings supported several components of theory surrounding emotions. Regarding the discussion board dialogue, several participants noted the impact of the content upon their affective processes. In accordance with the assumptions of Greenberg and Goldman (2008), the motivating emotions triggered the behavior of self-awareness and the need to continue self-exploration of the underlying triggers of the primary emotions. For example, one participant noted her need to “ask for grace” due to the realization of her “written” or “internal” responses to comments on the discussion board that “conjured . . . thoughts and feelings” that the student perceived as “a little bowl of negative there in me that I need to work through.”

Although students noted the cultural immersion project as the most impactful experience during the course, one participant also commented in regards to the immersion assignment, “you pick one thing and you spend 80% of your time on that, you’re missing out on the whole world.” Therefore, it is necessary to consider how to create an experience within the course so students’ thoughts and feelings can change toward more than one population. A suggested method through

which to do this is to promote peer processing. For example, assigning peers to pairs or groups with culturally different classmates to process course-related experiences. Such an assignment may also aid the students in learning to interact, ask questions, and broach challenging topics in a culturally sensitive manner. The learning of communication patterns and relationship building within the classroom could be transitioned into the counseling environment. As a result, students may learn how to broach such subjects with clients. Furthermore, as emotions can impact a student's motivation and interactions, group interactions also contribute to competency development.

### *Constructivist Paradigm*

The constructivist theory was used as a framework to explore the theoretical process of MCC development. As noted in the results of this study, the main factors that contributed to a change in thoughts and feelings toward culturally different persons have been experiential activities and narrative reading materials that evoke emotional responses. Such activities led to increased self-awareness, consciousness of others, and increased cultural sensitivity. Therefore, this study provides an understanding of the impact of interactions within the classroom environment, with the immersion population, and the student processing of emotional responses that transition into behavior. The results of this investigation are consistent with the constructivist paradigm, which asserts that "reality is constructed through social interaction and dialogue" (Williams, 2006, p. 212).

This paradigm promotes a sense of humility in realizing that one's objective perceptions is only one story amongst several within an encounter with others (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). Regarding the immersion experience, participants identified responses including "humbleness," "eye-opening," "enriching," "enlightening," and "more in touch with reality." Such descriptive

words reflect how students were able to hear the story of the immersion population. As the counseling students entered into group interactions via the online environment and immersion experience, (a) an increased self-awareness occurred regarding personal values and beliefs; (b) realization occurred that their perspective was not the only existing reality; and (c) a cocreation of more beneficial realities occurred as students interacted through dialogue, opinion sharing, and showing respect for the perspectives of others (Nichols & Schwartz).

This paradigm provides a framework through which counselor educators can develop an interactive learning environment amongst the counseling students through discussion boards, peer processing groups, and live classroom sessions. Furthermore, the instructor must explore ways to promote a safe classroom environment that allows for self-expression and the reciprocation of respect for others' perspectives. Such an environment allows for several messages to be communicated within the dialogue and student exposure to various cultural stories. In addition, these types of interactions within the classroom environment may be transitioned to professional counseling sessions as the student may learn to engage in culturally sensitive dialogue with the client, communicate respect for the client's story, and better understand how the client's perspective of reality affects the manner in which he or she views and copes with the presenting issue or primary complaint (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998).

#### *Study Delimitation and Limitations*

The study delimitation is the focus on interviewing students in a doctoral-level counseling program at a Mid-Atlantic university. In addition, the participants must have recently completed an online multicultural counseling course within a 6-month period. As a result, a limitation of this study is the use of a small sample size through a random sampling method, which decreases the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, the results will not be applicable

to all doctoral-level counseling students. Next, the use of an in-depth interview may yield responses impacted by the emotional state of the participant, reactivity, social desirability, and recall error (Patton, 2002). A further limitation is the inferential reasoning aspect of content analysis, which is impacted by the interpretation of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As it is probable that each limitation could have impacted the study outcomes, there is a need for future research.

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

Based on the results of this investigation, there are several recommended areas of future research to enhance implementation of MCC standards into counselor education. Future research should include a larger sample size with a quantitative component to enhance generalizability of results. It would be beneficial to the counseling field to explore how multicultural competency training translates into skill development. Although a demographic characteristic of this study was to explore the online course interactions, a future study comparing the online classroom to the traditional classroom may aid in the enhancement of course structure. Finally, the multicultural competency development process should also be assessed within additional theoretical paradigms such as critical theory, postmodernism, and postpositivism.

#### *Summary*

This exploratory study was implemented to gain a better understanding of counseling students' affective process of multicultural competency development. The study results were generated through the identification of common themes across participants. The findings were presented and determined that the main factors that contributed to a change in thoughts and feelings toward culturally different persons were experiential activities and narrative reading materials that evoke internal emotional responses and led to increased self-awareness,

consciousness of others, and increased cultural sensitivity. According to these findings, recommendations and suggested areas for future research were provided to enhance online and traditional classroom teaching strategies.

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