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Multicultural Competence For *Doing* Social Justice: Expanding Our Awareness, Knowledge, And Skills

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Abstract

The construct of multicultural competence has gained much currency in the literature; yet, less attention has been paid to students' social justice advocacy and how to facilitate students' growth in this area. Focusing on multicultural education in graduate programs that prepare future student affairs professionals, this position article provides a critique of multicultural knowledge, awareness and skills, and argues for competencies grounded in a commitment to social justice. While practitioners may be prepared to work with diverse populations, it is argued they are less equipped to foster social change. Developing awareness as critically conscious practitioners, acquiring knowledge as equity minded and privilege-cognizant individuals, and building skills in social justice advocacy are essential for the future agenda for multicultural competence.

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Introduction

In a global society with rapidly changing demographics, educators are called to interact with diverse groups and support the educational achievement of individuals from varied backgrounds (Ameny-Dixon, 2004). Multicultural education programs are offered in colleges and universities to address the growing trend of the diverse population (Banks, 2008; Cheng & Zhao, 2006; Flowers, 2003), and a growing body of literature explores how to best prepare educators to work with demographically heterogeneous populations (Bell, 2000; Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007; Choi-Pearson, Castillo, & Maples, 2004; Coleman, 1996; Fox & Gay, 1995; Gorski, 2009, 2010; Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2011; McEwen & Roper, 1994). Emerging from the literature has been an interest in multicultural competencies -- “the specific goals and objectives that should be followed by practitioners, administrators, and preparation program faculty to move beyond rhetoric and toward action” in the area of multicultural education (Howard-Hamilton, Richardson, & Shuford, 1998, p. 6). Yet, the extent to which these competencies translate into graduates’ readiness to become advocates for social change is less clear (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005).

As a faculty member in a student affairs professional preparation program, I teach a required graduate course on diversity in higher education. Later in this paper I describe this course; however, in brief, my aim is to educate students about multiculturalism and diversity in higher education, and to motivate students to use their knowledge to take actions to solve social problems. I strive for students to not just acquire knowledge of difference and multiculturalism but also to critically assess and act to transform unjust practices and policies. In my efforts to facilitate such awareness, knowledge, and skills in my students, I have been left with questions: How might the development of multicultural competencies (unintentionally) serve to maintain the status quo more than inspire creative thinking about the root causes of social problems? Why do most students seem to participate uncritically in their educational and administrative domains, or are uncertain how to act in justice-oriented ways when they develop critical understandings? In what ways might (taken-for-granted) assumptions about the ‘goodness’ of multicultural competence leave one falling short in enacting a commitment to social justice? This paper explores such questions about students’ capacity to “do” social justice. I argue for the need to expand dominant conceptualizations of multicultural knowledge, awareness, and skills to develop equity-minded and privilege-cognizant practitioners who have the capacity to extend their awareness into action and advocate for social justice (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). Before I discuss this position, a brief review, and critique, of multicultural competence are provided.

Multicultural Competence

Nearly three decades ago, scholars, most notably in the field of counseling psychology, advocated a framework to guide the professional preparation of practitioners to ensure they were equipped with the necessary competence to work with the changing demographics of the population (Ponterotto & Cases, 1987). The development of a multicultural competence framework, divided into three dimensions (awareness, knowledge, and skills) serves to guide ethical practice from multicultural perspectives (Pope & Reynolds, 1997; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Vera & Speight, 2003). Multicultural competence has been increasingly recognized as an important component of professional preparation programs in fields such as counseling, teaching, social work, and educational administration.

The three dimensions of multicultural competence include *awareness*, meaning an “openness to learning about differences associated with various cultures and being conscious of biases and assumptions we hold and the impact they have” on others; *knowledge* of diverse cultures and groups, and “an understanding of within group differences and the intersection of multiple identities;” and *skills* which “involves the capacity to work effectively with individuals from various cultural backgrounds by translating awareness and knowledge... into good practice” (Gayles & Kelly, 2007, p. 194). Advocates of multicultural competence require professionals (e.g., teachers, counselors, social workers, and administrators) to acquire the knowledge, awareness, and skills that will enable them to work more effectively, respectfully, and equitably among demographically heterogeneous populations (D’Andrea, Daniels, & Noonan, 2003). Others, however, argue that it is the systems (e.g., universities, schools, and mental health care) within which these administrators, teachers, and counselors work that too often fail the populations with whom they are striving to work more effectively, respectfully, and ethically (Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, Irvine, Nieto, Schofield, & Stephan, 2001).

Specific to the field of student affairs, Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004) developed a framework for multicultural competence that would both extend “the significant work in the counseling psychology multicultural literature to the student affairs profession” and offer a competency framework for student affairs professionals. These authors posit that student affairs professionals must develop awareness and knowledge of diversity and multiculturalism, and acquire the skills needed to offer meaningful services to all students (Pope et al., 2004). They further argue that multicultural competence should not be the exclusive domain or responsibility of a limited few; rather, it must be demonstrated by all professionals (Pope et al., 2004).

Future student affairs professionals learn about the profession and higher education in general through graduate preparation programs (McEwen & Roper, 1994; Pope & Reynolds,

1997). Gayles and Kelly (2007) reported that learning about diversity is in the curriculum of most student affairs preparation programs; however, they added that more should be done in diversity courses to assist students in converting multicultural awareness and knowledge into skills they can use as practitioners. If professional preparation programs are the primary place where current and future student affairs professionals develop multicultural competence (Flowers, 2003), then we must ask questions of the knowledge students are acquiring, the self-awareness they are cultivating, and the skills they are developing. Professions can, and should, assert a commitment, but without the development of the skills to enact a commitment to not only multiculturalism, but also social justice, we will risk (unwittingly) maintaining the status quo.

Developing Competence for *Doing* Social Justice

A commitment to multiculturalism and diversity is not necessarily synonymous with a commitment to social justice (Gregg & Saha, 2006; Kumagai & Lypson, 2009). The former can be viewed as attending to human differences, such as ability, age, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, race, religion, or sexual orientation; whereas the latter – social justice – has to do with “how advantages and disadvantages are distributed to individuals in society” (Miller, 1999, p. 11). I align with those (e.g., Banks, 1995, 2008; Giroux, 1993) who call for educators and practitioners to work toward socially just, liberatory practices, and with those (e.g., Gorski, 2009; Kumagai & Lypson, 2009) who argue multicultural competence falls short as a framework that can guide the preparation of students (future practitioners) to advocate for educational equity and dismantle oppressive power structures. For instance, Zalaquett, Foley, Tillotson, Dinsmore, and Hof (2008) critique educators’ lack of knowledge regarding how systems of discrimination and oppression are manifested and operate in educational institutions, and argue that facilitating such thinking is needed to yield more socially just outcomes. Kumagai and Lypson (2009) argue that competency frameworks must foster critical self-awareness, to yield critical consciousness about one’s own identity and privileges. Such a consciousness involves a “reflective awareness of the differences in power and privilege and the inequities that are embedded in social relationships” (p. 783). They add that such critical awareness will foster a commitment to social justice. Others (e.g., Gorski, 2009; Vera & Speight, 2003) question the degree to which these competencies equip educational practitioners to function as a change agent at organizational, institutional, and societal levels. Thus, having competence that is oriented toward social justice can be understood as thinking critically about social issues (i.e. racial inequity in educational outcomes), and working to change unjust social, political, and economic structures. Students, then, as they acquire multicultural competencies are reflecting

different ways of thinking – or what Bensimon (2005) refers to as “cognitive frames” that govern how individuals interpret or reason a problem or situation, and how they “design and implement their actions” (p. 100).

Bensimon’s (2005) conceptual application of “cognitive frames” is instructive for thinking about how students, in professional preparation programs, make sense of multiculturalism on campus. She delineates three cognitive frames (diversity-minded, deficit thinking, and equity-minded) to illustrate how educators might think differently about a problem, such as the persistence of unequal educational outcomes among different racial groups. Bensimon argues that diversity-minded individuals

focus their attention on demographic characteristics of the student body, and view diversity in terms of interracial contact and human relations. Diversity is also viewed as an institutional characteristic that promotes learning outcomes and better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society. (p. 101)

For instance, universities, in their diversity planning and programming, describe the challenge of recruiting and retaining under-represented, at-risk, and disadvantaged populations (Iverson, 2012). In response, universities develop “pipelines,” bridge programs, recognition and affirmation programs, and other intervention efforts to support those failing to achieve (or celebrate those who are achieving) parity with the majority – an unquestioned norm against which success is measured (Iverson, 2012).

Through a deficit cognitive frame, individuals are “inclined to attribute differences in educational outcomes for black [*sic*], Hispanic, and Native American students, such as lower rates of retention or degree complete, to cultural stereotypes, inadequate socialization, or lack of motivation and initiative on the part of the students” (Bensimon, 2005, p. 102). For instance, lack of preparation for college or failure to achieve success in college is attributed to deficiencies within individuals, or groups. Educators might conclude that students cannot overcome the disadvantages of poverty and underpreparedness, and so unequal outcomes might be expected (Bensimon, 2005). Findings from a three-year study by Solomon (2000) illustrate this frame. Teacher candidates were assigned in cross-race dyad partnerships to field-based practica; the rationale was that such collaborations would enrich the pedagogical process. While individuals tackled sensitive racial and cultural issues through their partnerships, the study “uncovered personal, institutional, and systemic factors that...interact with race to restrict, marginalize, and subordinate [teacher] candidates’ of color” (p. 967). Some practicum

personnel perceived candidates of color “as subordinate and deficient members in the dyad partnerships” (p. 967).

Individuals guided by an equity cognitive frame, or what Bensimon (2005) refers to as “equity-minded” individuals, focus on the institutional practices that produce unequal outcomes, the manifestation of institutionalized racism, and how to change institutions to produce equitable educational outcomes. Returning to Solomon’s (2000) study, educators must be prepared to “accept the challenge of confronting racism” (p. 972), and help students develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills to equip practitioners to be “equity conscious” (p. 975). Equity-minded individuals, I argue, are best positioned to advocate for social justice.

Expanding Multicultural Competence for Social Justice

In this section, I elaborate on the three dimensions of multicultural competence – knowledge, awareness, and skills – and argue for an expansion of each dimension, grounded in a commitment to social justice. Such an operationalization of multicultural competence has potential to develop equity-minded practitioners, with critical consciousness, and skills to advocate for social change.

Expanding Knowledge: Becoming Equity-Minded

Central to the development of multicultural knowledge is an understanding of diverse cultures and oppressed groups (Pope et al., 2004). While sometimes conflated with or reduced to race and ethnicity, this multicultural knowledge aims to cultivate understanding of various groups, including gender, class, religion, ability, sexual orientation, among other identities, as well as an “understanding of multiple identities and multiple oppressions” (Pope et al., 2004, p. 20). Growing recognition of the complexity and plurality of identity, and of the intersectionality of diverse identities is included in multicultural knowledge (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Yet, this “diversity minded” multicultural knowledge risks creating, or reinforcing, cultural distance; turning multicultural education into what Wear (2003) terms “a kind of ‘safari’ experience where ‘tourists’ view unfortunate inhabitants who need services” (p. 553). Further, multicultural education, guided by a deficit frame, can even reinscribe stereotypes (Kumagai & Lyson, 2009).

Some levy criticism regarding the extent to which students, through formal schooling, acquire knowledge of “how power relations function to structure racial and ethnic identities” (Giroux, 1993, p. 23); understand “how structural imbalances in power produce real limits on the capacity of subordinate groups to exercise a sense of agency and struggle” (p. 27); and come to recognize the “ways in which institutionalized knowledge within schools, universities, and the

popular culture can perpetuate stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups” (Banks et al., 2001, p. 197). A critical multiculturalism, or what Giroux (1993) calls “insurgent multiculturalism,” shifts attention away from “an exclusive focus on subordinate groups... to one which examines how racism in its various forms is produced historically, semiotically, and institutionally in various levels of dominant, white culture” (p. 26; also Gorski, 2009; Wear, 2003). Pope et al. (2004) delineate an understanding of institutional oppression and power as characteristic of multicultural knowledge; however, concepts, such as oppression and privilege, are too often misunderstood or met with defensiveness and resistance – namely by those who are members of privileged groups (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002). The unintended consequences of attention to marginalized groups without (sufficient) knowledge of how structures and institutional practices re/produce inequities risks an objective gaze on “others” being studied. Some argue, and I concur, that the focus of multicultural knowledge should be on “the existence of privilege and the lopsided distribution of power that keeps it going” (Johnson, 2006, p. 12; also Bishop 2002; Broido & Reason, 2005; Liu & Pope-Davis, 2003). Individuals come to learn that for effective reform, “the entire system must be restructured, not just some of its parts” (Banks, 1995, p. 393). Expanding multicultural knowledge of difference to place greater emphasis on institutional power, prejudice, discrimination, and privilege, can develop “privilege-cognizant” individuals (Bailey, 1998) who are better positioned to serve as equity-minded practitioners (Bensimon, 2005).

When educational approaches deepen one’s knowledge, and perhaps yield an “insurgent” multicultural knowledge, individuals are less likely to view class, race, gender, and other dimensions of identity as difference but instead “as social problems rooted in real material and institutional factors that produce specific forms of inequality and oppression” (Giroux, 1993, p. 27). Of note, such knowledge does not necessarily translate into action; students may not have the skills to reform any one part of an organization, much less initiate a systemic approach to educational reform. Consequently, when faced with intractable challenges and scarce resources, educational practitioners are likely to devise “quick fixes to complex educational problems” (Banks, 1995, p. 393). So, while knowledge of a “systemic view of educational reform is essential for the implementation of thoughtful, creative, and meaningful educational reform” (Banks, 1995, p. 393), individuals must also have opportunities to develop the skills to lead such change; a point I will discuss later.

Expanding Awareness: Developing Critical Consciousness

While some posit that awareness is a prerequisite for developing multicultural competence (Richardson & Molinaro, 1996), I view awareness as inextricably linked to the development of knowledge. Such awareness involves the self-reflexive work through which individuals (might) unpack their identities, reveal their blind spots, and interrogate the givenness of what they know. According to Pope et al. (2004), a multiculturally competent student affairs professional is aware of his/her own assumptions, biases, and values. Yet, what does it mean to develop such self-awareness?

Autobiographical inquiry, often initiated through writing an autobiographical essay, is one frequently used pedagogical strategy intended to help students engage in self-examination as a means of achieving greater consciousness of the multiple identities we perform, and our relation to others so that we might act more justly in the world (Greene, 1971). The assumption is that through a greater awareness of self, one will throw herself “outward *towards* the world” (Greene, 1971, p. 139, italics in original). Yet, some are critical of the potential for autobiographical inquiry “as a means of achieving greater social justice in education” (James, 2008, p. 161), positing that following introspection, individuals may not “be any more ‘just’ than the ways we engaged the world prior to our inquiry of self” (p. 164). Students, when assigned critical self-examination, may complete an autobiographical essay as nothing more than a transaction for a grade. While some will observe that such critical self-examination is voluntary, Rist (1970) reminds us that educators’ expectations and biases shape their interactions with students. Thus, failure to critically and deeply explore oneself or to consider how (new-found) understandings might influence personal choices, professional actions, and the ways one views and interacts with others can have profound (unintended) consequences (James, 2008).

As one develops critical multicultural knowledge, and becomes “privilege cognizant,” one will likely also demonstrate an increased readiness for (critical) self-awareness (Bailey, 1998). With knowledge of one’s privilege, those who occupy privileged categories (i.e. Whites) may be less likely to be resistant of the critical self-reflection expected in experiences designed to develop multicultural awareness, and are more prepared for the feelings of guilt and shame that may be induced by such educational experiences (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002; Choi-Pearson, Castillo, & Maples, 2004). Developing such awareness is a process (Watt, 2007), not an exercise (or set of activities); its aim is to develop critically conscious thinking (Landreman, Rasmussen, King, & Xinquan Jiang, 2007). Differentiated from critical thinking, critical consciousness implies an awareness of societal systems of advantage and disadvantage rooted in sociocultural identity differences (e.g., race, social class, gender, disability, sexual identity, religion), and by its focus on social change (Allan & Iverson, 2004). Thus, students who,

through self-reflection and awareness, develop critical consciousness can choose a course of action informed by more sophisticated understandings of social power and its implications; what Fisher (1996) refers to as the “capability to make our global society a better place” (p. 227).

Dialogue groups, coupled with individual reflective writing, are increasingly seen as a means of cultivating critical consciousness (Iverson, in press; Watt, 2007). “Difficult dialogues” require “stamina to sit with discomfort” (Watt, 2007, p. 115), but also afford opportunities to imagine and envision alternative realities. Watt argues that “critical consciousness does not come without one engaging in difficult conversations and facing what it means to be privileged” (p. 115), and Bishop (2002) observes that troubling emotions are elicited through the self-awareness process. Chick, Karis, and Kernahan (2009) call for the cultivation of meta-affective awareness so individuals “can sort through the complex mix of feelings triggered when new information collides with unexamined prior knowledge” (p. 11).

Empathy is a critical aspect of awareness; yet, one must ultimately move beyond empathy. It is then that one begins to critically reflect on one’s own biases, privileges, and assumptions and acknowledges “one’s own personal responsibility to understand the causes of the suffering and seek effective solutions” (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009, p. 785). Failing to achieve such critical consciousness “may lead a reader or listener to conclude, ‘yes, now I know what he/she/they experience’ and leave it at that” (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009, p. 785). Cultivating this cognitive depth – what Broido (2000) referred to as “meaning making” – contributes to the development of self-confidence and the potential to yield new skills as social justice allies (Broido & Reason, 2005). Efforts to develop such critically conscious multicultural awareness must seek to disrupt what King (1991) calls the “dysconscious”—the “uncritical habit of mind” that rationalizes inequities and discrimination by “accepting the existing order of things as given” (p. 135). Through *un*thinking, one may develop what Freire (1970) termed “conscientization”—meaning, to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and awaken critical consciousness (p. 36).

Awareness – critical or not – does not necessarily translate into different ways of being and acting in the world (James, 2008). As individuals engage in critical self-reflection and difficult dialogues, and experience cognitive dissonance, cognitive restructuring or shifts in one’s belief structure can occur (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Landreman et al., 2007). However, individuals do not necessarily have the skills for inter/acting differently with the world. Theoharis (2007) suggests that developing a critical consciousness can be “marshaled to enact resistance and lead toward social justice” (p. 250).

Expanding Skills: Advocating for Social Justice

According to Pope et al. (2004), a multiculturally competent student affairs professional demonstrates the skills to “discuss cultural differences and issues,” “effectively communicate across those differences,” and “to empathize” with individuals who are culturally different, among other skills (p. 18). I share Landreman’s (2003) critique that efforts to develop multicultural competence “have been reduced to well-intentioned but naïve attempts to develop behaviors that are culturally sensitive” but fail to “address the *application* of one’s understanding” (in Landreman et al., 2007, p. 276, italics in original). Skill development, if students have opportunity at all, tends to focus on individual-level skills (e.g., empathy, communication). Pope et al. (2004) identified the ability to challenge oppressive systems as a necessary skill, but little evidence exists regarding how such skills might be developed, or how educators might encourage students to act individually or collectively to produce social change (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002). Reason and Broido (2005) argue that student affairs practitioners have a responsibility to influence change on their campuses; yet, they are largely ill-equipped for how to initiate and conduct such work. Preparation programs, Theoharis (2007) observed, do not develop administrators’ capacity to enact, or lead, such change or justice-oriented efforts.

Skills are needed that will prepare individuals to effectively intervene at not only individual levels (e.g., helping, advising, supporting one person at a time), but also the capacity to confront systemic factors and operate as a change agent at organizational levels. Such skills might include advocacy, policy-making, negotiating, and organizing (Evans, Assadi, & Herriott, 2005; Reason, Broido, Davis, & Evans, 2005). Reason and Davis (2005), for instance, argue for “action that upsets the status quo” (p. 7), and Theoharis (2007) similarly advocates for leaders to develop “the capacity to enact resistance” (p. 250). The skills necessary to carry out social justice work, Nilsson and Schmidt (2005) found, are grounded in political interest and desire to engage in such work. They added that in order to develop a social justice orientation, future student affairs professionals must be taught skills, such as “how to organize rallies, demonstrations, and other ways to protest” (p. 278).

Some argue that experiential education, and in particular service-learning, is a curricular strategy for cultivating such social justice skills (Vera & Speight, 2003). However, approaches to service-learning vary and yield different outcomes. Disproportionately, service-learning approaches are oriented toward charity, and emphasize “a kind of compensatory justice where the well-off feel obligated to help the less advantaged” (Battistoni, 1997, p. 151). Kendall (1990) posited that service-learning experiences should move students beyond performing acts of charity to instead addressing root causes of systemic social inequality. Rather than connecting

social justice work to service-learning so it can “seem less politically charged” (Broido, 2000, p. 16), educators must find ways to foster students’ political interests and desires to engage in social justice advocacy (Hamrick, 1998; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2002). Justice-oriented (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996), revolutionary (Reich, 1994), and activist (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002) approaches to service-learning can help students to facilitate a deeper understanding of socio-political issues, and develop the skills necessary to work toward social change (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Donahue, 2000; Iverson & James, 2010). Thus, I argue that justice-oriented action holds greater potential for cultivating the skills needed to work for social justice, and for “deepening students’ grasp of equity and fostering activism” (Boyle-Baise, Brown, Hsu, Jones, Prakash, Rausch, Vitosl, & Wahlquist, 2006, p. 17). Next, I describe one pedagogical approach that seeks to cultivate equity-mindedness, critical consciousness, and social justice advocacy, and I offer an illustrative case of one’s student’s experience taking action toward social justice.

Course Description

In the required graduate seminar on diversity in higher education that I teach, students are introduced “to theories, concepts, policies, controversies, challenges and possibilities related to gender, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, socio-economic, ability, and religious differences among students, faculty, administrators, and other employees in postsecondary settings” (excerpted from syllabus). Guided by a critical, transformative, social action approach to teaching (Banks, 1995; Gorski, 2010; Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001), I have purposefully designed the course to expose students to oppressive structures that often are invisible to those who occupy privileged groups, to critically reflect, and to take action. In this way, the course has as its goal to develop multicultural competence grounded in a commitment to social justice.

Knowledge

In an effort to cultivate privilege-cognizant and equity-minded individuals, I assign two particular readings to serve as conceptual scaffolding for our thinking and discussion. Johnson’s *Privilege, power and difference* (2006) introduces students to the concept of privilege. Building on Peggy McIntosh’s essay on White privilege, Johnson introduces the reader to the social construction of difference and how the world is organized in ways that encourage people to use difference to include or exclude, reward or punish, credit or discredit, elevate or oppress, value or devalue, leave alone or harass. Johnson further challenges the reader to “use the words” he asserts we have abandoned and to initiate conversations about racism, patriarchy, privilege, and oppression.

Students also read an essay, “The problem: Discrimination,” that distinguishes individual oppression from organizational and structural oppression (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1981/2001). White students in my class, if they acknowledge racism at all, generally perceive incidents of discrimination as isolated acts committed by a biased, bigoted individual; and rarely are they aware of structural oppression. As they cautiously consider these concepts, students, noting this essay’s publication date of 1981, too quickly dismiss organizational and structural discrimination as “a thing of the past.” To further illustrate these concepts, and make visible the social, economic, and political conditions that disproportionately channel advantages to White people, I show episode 3, “The house we live in,” of the 3-part documentary, “Race: The power of an illusion” (Smith, 2003). This segment powerfully describes the ways U.S. institutions and policies advantage some groups at the expense of others. For many students, this is a turning point in our conversations. We have the potential (albeit not always realized) to have richer discussions about not only race in society, but other forms of oppression along multiple dimensions of identity, i.e. gender, sexuality, religion. Students, slowly, begin to identify policies and practices in their everyday lives that provide further evidence of institutionalized discrimination, and consider how they might take action.

Awareness

In an effort to cultivate their multicultural awareness, and particularly critical consciousness, I assign students self-reflective exercises such as the autobiographical essay, so they can engage in self-examination as a means of achieving greater consciousness of the spaces we inhabit and our relation to others so that we might act more justly in the world. Further, in recognition of the power and potential for others to hold a mirror to one’s evolving understanding of self, I utilize facilitated dialogue groups, coupled with individual reflective writing (journaling), as a means of cultivating self-awareness—as an invitation for students to ask questions, to take risks, to imagine and “envision alternative realities” (Weems, 2003, p. 7). The dialogue groups meet for six 60-90 minute sessions during the semester. The power of empathy—seen in and through the eyes of others—can be felt through group storytelling about self and others, and can play a crucial role in developing critical consciousness. Finally, through a reflective journal (one entry per week), students are invited to “see anew in ways that are not totally saturated with the known” (Gitlin, 2005, p. 17).

Skills

The culminating project in the course assigns students to “take action.” An objective of the assignment is to increase students’ skill and confidence about working with students, faculty, and staff regarding diversity and as advocates for social justice. This three-part assignment, entitled “taking change-oriented action,” requires students to 1) learn more about a (self-selected) issue with the goal of identifying an area requiring their action; 2) propose what action will be taken, and how their proposition would fit within existing efforts; and 3) display and discuss, at an end-of-semester exhibition, the action taken and what was learned. Many students struggle with the assignment, uncertain what to do, and very apprehensive about inserting themselves into a process or system. One or two students each semester will ask if they can submit a research paper on their issue in lieu of taking action, which is not an option. Such requests are illustrative of how students are at different levels of readiness for taking action (something I discuss later in the implications section). Most, however, begin as Rachel² did; they identify a gap in training or programming and consider how they might fill the gap.

Rachel: An Illustrative Case

The majority of students enrolled in this diversity class each semester are female, White, Christian, heterosexual, and between the ages of 23-28.³ These demographics, namely being predominantly White and female, are reflective of the population of students enrolled in student affairs professional preparation programs; they are demographically fairly homogeneous (Rapp, 1997; Tull, 2006; Turrentine & Conley, 2001). Rachel, the student who serves as an illustrative case of multicultural competence for social justice, is a White, heterosexual female, in her mid-twenties.

Rachel chose to complete her “action taking” project at her graduate assistantship site. She worked in residence life and observed that little support existed for students from diverse backgrounds. In an initial essay about her project, she wrote “In casual conversations with coworkers, staff, and students, I was told that there is no support for international students, transgender students, nontraditional students, and the list goes on.” Recalling RA training from the previous semester, Rachel noted that the department offered no LGBT-specific training. A self-identified LGBT advocate, Rachel proposed at the time to develop such training for residence life staff. She approached her supervisor with her offer but was told to focus her efforts elsewhere.

² All names are pseudonyms and all work is cited with permission. Rachel’s experience is part of a larger project that has received human subjects approval through an institutional review board.

³ Demographic data collected as part of a larger study on the development of graduate students’ multicultural competence.

Rachel participated in a webinar hosted by CAMPUSPEAK and CampusPride entitled, "What's Your Campus Climate: Supporting LGBT and Ally Students." Following the webinar, she met with the associate director responsible for staff training, to propose an LGBT-specific in-service for residence life staff. She was again turned away, this time told "our staff isn't ready for that." To this point Rachel's story is similar to most students. As they develop plans, some initial ideas and efforts are thwarted. They identify an alternative context or change an event, and through their action taking, they acquire skills in communication and event planning, among others. For instance, students have shared a video with their colleagues, on how to work with diverse populations; created an educational presentation for a new student seminar; or developed a program for a residence hall community on a diversity-related topic.

For Rachel, though, here is where her story diverges. In her final reflective essay, she wrote, "I took advice given by Johnson (2006), to work with other people. He writes, 'This is one of the most important principles of participating in change' (p. 150)." She initiated conversations with colleagues on campus about alternative avenues she might take with her action taking, and found an ally with Jean, the graduate student (not in Rachel's program) responsible for LGBT student services on campus. Rachel was fueled by this connection with a person who shared her passion and advocacy goals. "Two people working together would be much more effective than one person in a crowd of thousands," Rachel commented in her final paper.

Jean shared she was trying to organize a group of LGBT students to attend an open forum, hosted by student government, with the new university president. Rachel, noting that not all LGBT students would attend, suggested they initiate a letter writing campaign. In collaboration, they contacted students, inviting their attendance at the open forum and/or letter writing. As they talked with students, they compiled a list of questions from the concerns they heard regarding how to (better) support students, and faculty and staff, on campus. Rachel, as she collected letters and prepared for the open forum, cited, in her final reflective essay, Johnson's (2006) suggestions to "Make noise, be seen. Stand up, volunteer, speak out, show up. Every oppressive system feeds on silence. Don't collude in it" (p. 144). She reflected that she planned "to make noise in a very public venue where administrators would have no choice but to hear us." At the forum, she asked the president, "What will you do to address the systemic LGBT issues on campus?" He described a commitment to "an even playing field" and "to remove barriers," but Rachel and Jean were not satisfied. They approached the president after the meeting, giving him the letters they had collected and requesting a follow-up meeting. While he said yes, when they called his office, they were redirected to the vice president for institutional diversity.

In preparation for this appointment, Rachel and Jean gathered supporting materials, including why the university needs support services for LGBT students, examples of other campuses' non-discrimination policy statements on gender/identity expression, and LGBT support services at other comparable institutions. They also brought two LGBT students to the meeting to share their stories and needs. The vice president concluded that more information was needed.

Rachel and Jean gathered more documentation, and brought 7 students to a subsequent meeting. They were similarly told greater understanding of the community needs would have to occur, but Rachel and Jean were not asked to pursue this further. No future meetings would be scheduled; they were told by the vice president that she'd be traveling and would "be in touch," which she was not.

This was the end of Rachel's semester and thus her action taking concluded. One could view her project as unsuccessful, as she did not yield a product (such as a program or training). Yet, the skills she deployed – in social justice advocacy and organizing – were very different from the majority of her peers. Rachel reflected in her final paper that "Taking a stand was not easy. Student affairs administrators do not have the time; we do not have the resources; and we fear for our job security. However, we must stop applying bandaids to inequities on campus and start addressing the problems at their source. I encountered one problem on campus that sparked me into real action, and the results were more rewarding than any other work I have ever completed."

Implications

What is it about Rachel's action taking that has relevance and meaning for conversations about multicultural competence? Rachel's story illustrates an alternative to the typical approaches to taking action, i.e. planning a program, leading a book discussion, developing a bulletin board, or implementing a training. These approaches are valuable exercises in applying knowledge and developing skills. However, they generally function within existing structures or build on current organizational practices. Less often will students, like Rachel, take action intended to disrupt the status quo. Yet, I argue, the action that is needed must be disruptive and advocate for social justice; multicultural competence must include the ability to function as a change agent at organizational, institutional, and societal levels. In this section, I offer some considerations and recommendations for developing multicultural competence in graduate preparation programs that might enable student affairs professionals to

become privilege cognizant and equity-minded, engage in critically conscious thinking, and deploy skills for social justice.

The “Push” and “Pull” of Coursework

More needs to be “done in diversity courses to assist [students] in translating multicultural awareness and knowledge to skills they can use as practitioners” (Gayles & Kelly, 2007, p. 203). Educators must ensure that learning objectives address not only knowledge and awareness, but also skills, and more specifically the development of skills for social justice advocacy. Broido (2000) found that individuals were drawn into social justice advocacy when they were expected to based on their roles or when they were invited to complete such work; she argues that courses can “pull” students into social justice work.

At one university, I taught introductory women’s studies in which students were assigned activism projects (Iverson, 2008). Colleagues would ask “how can you assign activism?” or would assert “you can’t assign activism.” I retorted that there are different skills students should develop through different projects. A final paper cultivated one set of skills (i.e. academic writing), but if I wanted students to learn how to participate in a politicized process surrounding issues of concern to them, a final paper would not do it.

Assignments can also give students a “push” to adopt a stance they might not otherwise. When I teach a graduate course on service-learning in higher education, students participate in a service-learning project; however, they are also assigned to engage in an act of dissent, as I want them to experience and for us to discuss the continuum of possibilities for civic engagement. Many students are reluctant to take action without encouragement, invitation, or assignment (Reason & Broido, 2005); thus, it is important to facilitate such experiential opportunities. I am not suggesting to push students toward a particular ideological stance. Taking action can assume many forms and align with various ideological points of view. Students were encouraged to explore multiple perspectives on issues and self-select the focus of their projects.

Student affairs professionals share a responsibility to influence change on their campuses, and they are often in strategic positions to take institution-level action, such as changing unjust policies and practices. Professional preparation coursework is, thus, an essential site for developing the skills and confidence to complete such work (Broido & Reason, 2005; Munin & Speight, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Would Rachel have taken the action she did if not assigned? Maybe; however, most students would not. If such skills are not developed,

practitioners are not likely to enact what they do not know or have not experienced (Howard, 2006).

Developmental Readiness

Students engage with multicultural education in different ways. Students do not enter courses (or college) with comparable life experiences; they bring a range of learning styles and levels of cognitive complexity to every classroom. Instructors who are aware of students' "developmental readiness" (Gayles & Kelly, 2002, p. 204) can design their courses in ways that cultivate greater maturity in students' critical thinking. Conversely, failure to assess students' readiness can lead to student (and instructor) frustration. Some students will be resistant to multicultural education, or in particular to a social justice discourse (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002). It is important to carefully design courses and experiences in order to provide a balance of challenge and support for students as they "sort through the complex mix of feelings triggered when new information collides with unexamined prior knowledge" (Chick et al., 2009, p. 11).

Rachel was already a self-identified LGBT-advocate when she initiated her taking action project; however, for most students, their prior knowledge and commitments are unknown. Yet, those who occupy privileged identity categories (e.g., Whites) have not interrogated, much less acknowledged, their privilege (i.e. race). Those in marginalized groups (i.e. students of color), by contrast, are consistently making sense of their identity (i.e. race). Educators, then, must spend time helping students to learn and unlearn multicultural knowledge (i.e. racial attitudes), and for those who are members of privileged groups, they can explore their unearned privilege and their role in maintaining the status quo (Dass-Brailsford, 2007). Instructors can "scaffold students' deeper learning of social justice issues and minimize students' resistance" (Chizhik & Chizhik, p. 806). An awareness of students' developmental readiness, as well as intentionally structuring and sequencing discussions and activities, is necessary to promote critical consciousness.

Managing Risk

Developing multicultural competence for doing social justice is not without risk. Helms (2003) observed that administrators and policy-makers are not likely to support revolutionary change. New professionals, eager to apply newfound social justice skills, may quickly abandon their commitment if they encounter colleagues who are not supportive of social justice advocacy, or worse, they are viewed as "being too controversial" and face "possible negative repercussions" from supervisors (Zalaquett et al., 2008, p. 328). As Rachel reflected, "taking a

stand was not easy,” and when time and resources are limited, and job security is a fear, most will likely discontinue such efforts. Multicultural skills for social justice, then, must also include developing abilities in solidarity-building and cultivating an armor of allies to take collective action for social change.

Multicultural competence grounded in social justice poses another risk, or rather a threat, to individual beliefs, identity, and perspectives, namely held by those who are members of privileged groups (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002; Fecho, 2001; Gorski, 2006). Fear of this threat can stifle full participation by students, or by practitioners, and can prevent well-intentioned educators and students from developing their capacity as social justice advocates (Choi-Pearson, Castillo, & Maples, 2004; Fecho, 2001). Case and Hemmings (2005), in their study of White women pre-service teachers, described “distancing strategies” that these women used, such as silence and separation from responsibility, in response to perceptions that they were being positioned as racist. These authors advocate use of metadialogues as a tool to talk about what individuals might be distancing themselves from or remaining silent about. Others advocate use of role playing, improvisational story-telling, and reader’s theatre as mechanisms by which to share stories when students may be reluctant to think differently about the world, and to enact empathic failures and reveal defenses and resistances (Belliveau, 2007; Edmiston, 2000; Iverson, in press; Mulvey & Mandell, 2007; Pincus, 2001). Role playing might allow students to perform a character who says things they feel nervous about saying, permits them to flout the rules, and invites creative and playful transgressions of social norms (Griffiths, 2007).

Assessing Competencies

Educators preparing student affairs practitioners must expand emphases in how they assess and measure multicultural competencies. Fox and Gay (1995) argued that too much attention is placed on what students know, and we must focus more on what students can do. Further, the scope, depth, and complexity of awareness, knowledge, and skills must be better understood. Knowledge is not solely about understanding and respecting cultural differences, but also about understanding oppression, discrimination, privilege, and the role of power (Bell, 1997). Skills too must be assessed, not only of one’s ability to display culturally responsive behaviors, communicate empathically, or interrupt a homophobic joke, but also skills in enacting social justice advocacy, leading in the face of resistance, or organizing a rally or demonstration. Multicultural competencies can be assessed using various strategies. Reflective journaling and facilitated dialogues groups are one mechanism by which to understand students’ awareness

(Iverson, in press). Coleman (1996) proposes portfolio assessment as an approach to measure multicultural competence. Others offer instruments designed to assess multicultural competence (D'Andrea, Daniels, & Noonan, 2003; Pope & Reynolds, 1997).

At present, there is limited study regarding the permanence of the development of multicultural competence. Bell (2000), in his longitudinal study of the effect of a planned in-school practicum experience addressing cultural diversity, found that gains in multicultural knowledge, awareness, and attitudes reported at post-test had regressed by the follow-up, though were still above the initial pre-test score. Other studies have investigated professional preparation and competencies (Roberts, 2003; Waple, 2006) and transitional experiences of new professionals (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), but absent in the literature is a specific focus on the degree of change or permanence in the development of multicultural competence during graduate study. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand how new professionals are making sense of and using the multicultural knowledge, awareness, and skills developed in their graduate programs, as well as what continued development occurs in their workplaces (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008).

Conclusions

The need for multicultural competence continues to resound. In 2010, a joint publication by the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the national organization of Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) described professional competency areas for student affairs professionals. "Equity, diversity and inclusion," one of the 10 competency areas, delineates the "knowledge, attitudes [awareness], and skills needed to create learning environments that are enriched with diverse views and people" (ACPA/NASPA, 2010, p. 12). Yet, some assert that students in professional preparation programs continue to have insufficient competencies to respond to inequities, promote social change, or advocate for social justice (Zalaquett et al., 2008). Gayles and Kelly (2007) further argue it is "somewhat unethical to encourage students to be social change agents without providing them with knowledge [and skills] on how to be effective social justice educators" (p. 201).

In this position article, I have argued for an expanded definition of multicultural competence grounded in social justice advocacy. Such competencies – critical consciousness, equity-mindedness, and social justice advocacy – are necessary to address disparities and promote an agenda for social change. These competencies will not be developed in one course in one semester; as Case (2012) notes, engaging in critical self-reflection, dismantling oppressive structures, and taking vigilant action toward social change, is a lifelong process. I am

hopeful that the ideas advanced here might fuel future scholarship and lively debate for how multicultural education can lead to a professional commitment to advocate for a more equitable society.

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