Addressing Heterosexism: Student Narratives of a Guided Imagery Activity

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Abstract

A published guided imagery (GI) offers an innovative active learning tool for teaching about heterosexism in counselor education. A literature review precedes the description of a critical narrative inquiry of students' experiences with the GI activity. A sample of 19 students in two sections of a counseling course recounted stories of their GI experience in individual written reflections and focus group interviews. Findings describe individual and collective meaning-making, resulting in three themes about their struggles, insights, and perspectives of themselves and their personal and professional worlds. Implications for counselor education professionals include conceptualization and implementation of guided imagery for active learning and important considerations for managing students' emotional and cognitive reactions.

Keywords

Author's Notes

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals face violence, discrimination, and resultant mental health issues. Reported hate crimes in 2015 totaled 7,173 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017), and over 60% of these victimizations concerned sexual orientation bias. In a study of 770 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, McCarthy et al. (2014) found perceived discrimination was predictive of depressive symptoms. Victimization relates to greater psychological distress in LGB adolescents (Birkett et al., 2015). Counselors have endeavored to alleviate distress associated with discrimination and internalized heterosexist norms (Szymanski et al., 2008). Nevertheless, counselors may perpetuate discrimination via internalized heterosexist norms if unchallenged in counselor training (Balkin et al., 2009; Speciale et al., 2015). Guided imagery activities represent one way to increase critical self-reflection and perspective-taking that may challenge heterosexist norms in early training, and thereby interrupt heteronormativity within the counseling profession (Israel & Hackett, 2004).

Heterosexism is harmful to LGB individuals' well-being and deserves focus in counselor education. Heterosexism is a "systemic process that marginalizes LGB [lesbian, gay, bisexual] individuals based on a set of beliefs and assumptions that heterosexuality is…the preferred norm" (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011, p. 15). LGB clients reported that counselors imposed heteronormative beliefs by responding with surprise when clients expressed interest in a same-sex partner and lacking knowledge about LGB people's experiences (Eady et al., 2011). Such beliefs lead clients to feel judged and distrustful of professionals and may result in their termination of counseling (Eady et al., 2011; Israel et al., 2008). Counseling students have expressed minimal knowledge or awareness regarding LGB issues (Dillon et al., 2004), which can result in discriminatory services if they do not address their heteronormative bias. Counselor educators may need guidance on how to cover heterosexism and related topics.

Adult learning theory, specifically andragogy, acknowledges the learner's changing self-concept, experience as an avenue for learning, and one's preparedness and desire for learning (Knowles, 1984). Andragogy can be considered both learner-centered and problem-centered, versus pedagogy – teaching for children's learning – which traditionally focuses on the subject and/or the teacher (Knowles et al., 2015). Two educational practices applied in adult learning, which are relevant to counselor education on heterosexism, are reflective practice and active learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Schön, 1983). Internalized beliefs from one's upbringing can influence cognitions (Rosin, 2015). Increasing students' awareness of their beliefs is a foundational step toward cultural competence. Reflective practice targets self-awareness (Schön, 1983), wherein students consider professional scenarios and their personal experiences to develop new understandings and improve skills (Rosin, 2015). Active learning techniques complement this purpose in that students are involved in activities beyond passively listening to a lecture and development goes beyond knowledge to include skills such as "critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of course-related material" (Misseyanni et al., 2018, p. 92).

Guided imagery is used in education to engage students in reflective practice. However, little is known about its application (Kress et al., 2014), including its use as an active learning tool to address self-awareness of internalized cultural beliefs. We review the literature and this study's methodology for understanding counseling students' perceptions of a heterosexist guided imagery, then present findings and implications for increasing awareness of heterosexism.

Literature Review

Heterosexism consists of heteronormative assumptions, institutional heterosexism, and heterosexual privilege (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011). Heteronormative assumptions are automatic beliefs that heterosexual relationships are the norm. These assumptions often lead to

dismissiveness of LGB individuals' experiences. Institutional heterosexism includes societal and institutional reinforcement of heterosexual norms. Heterosexual privilege refers to unearned advantages that heterosexual individuals receive based on their orientation. Heterosexism is not cisgenderism, or a "cultural and systemic ideology that denies...self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth" (Lennon & Mistler, 2014, p. 63).

Professionals who use language and discourses common to their practice can promote heterosexism with LGB consumers (Smith et al., 2012). Israel et al. (2008) interviewed 42 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender individuals about helpful versus unhelpful counseling situations. Participants disclosed unhelpful situations wherein professionals imposed values and exhibited negative bias about clients' sexual orientation. Balkin et al. (2009) found that counselors with a rigid religious identity tended to hold more homophobic attitudes as well as tendencies toward sexism. Similarly, heteronormative beliefs fueled the conversion therapy movement. The goal of conversion therapy was to change an LGB person's sexual orientation to heterosexuality through aversive stimuli and techniques (Cramer et al., 2008). Its negative effects included increases in depression, anxiety, and suicide risk and attempts (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004). Addressing heterosexism in counselor training may be one way to alleviate the perpetuation of harmful counseling   practices.

Perceived discrimination has documented negative effects on one's well-being (Schmitt et al., 2014) and needs addressed within counselor education. Clients with concealable stigmas are more likely to have mental and physical health issues than clients with visible stigmas (Chaudoir et al., 2013). Concealed stigmas limit one's access to social support, increase internalized heterosexism, and increase the perceived risk of coming out. Counselor education professionals have called for further examination of heteronormativity in the field, sharing personal stories of

marginalization based on concealed stigmas, such as colleagues' voiced expectations about how LGB members should look (Speciale et al., 2015). Education is one avenue for challenging heterosexism by increasing awareness.

Increasing Awareness via Education

Limited educational dialogue and activities about LGB people impacts students' perceived competence. Sapp (2017) contended that *heterosexual fragility*, that is heterosexist stress that initiates defensive responses, underlies heterosexual students' negative attitudes or responses about LGB concerns. Hays et al. (2007) explored 16 counselors' perceptions of privilege and oppression in terms of education they received. Most felt underprepared and believed multicultural issues were inadequately addressed in coursework. Participants recommended instructors engage in open dialogue about invisible minorities, including LGB people, and foster a safe environment to discuss controversial issues.

Increased educational discourse may serve to ease heterosexual fragility. Smith and colleagues (2012) suggested educators facilitate discussions on how normativity is defined and inequalities are produced. Smith and colleagues (2008) recommended increasing students' awareness of oppressive language and encouraging they read counseling texts from a queer perspective to be inclusive of non-heterosexual identities and to gain insight into power in discourse. Queer theory is a useful tool in oppressive power of dominant norms such as those within heteronormative ideology. For example, educators may use queer theory to explore socially constructed sexuality constructs through a critical lens (Speciale et al., 2015). Others suggested promoting contact and authentic relationships between students and LGB community members (Smith et al., 2012).

Counselor educators have highlighted the promise of teaching techniques grounded in andragogy (Granello & Hazler, 1998; Purswell, 2019). These techniques have potential to intersect with the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014), accreditation standards (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2015), and the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MCSJCCs; Multicultural Counseling Competencies Revisions Committee, 2015). Purswell (2019) noted the intersection of counselor ethics and andragogy via active and reflective learning: counselors need to proactively and critically examine clinical decisions and professional development offerings to maintain their ethical obligations for good client care., Their own continuing education and andragogy underscores students' reflective judgment via active participation in learning. Adult learning concepts have been present in CACREP Standards (e.g., 2009, 2016) concerning student affairs and college counseling. Adult learning models were added to the latest CACREP Standards for doctoral programs.

Although the literature on counselor education grounded in andragogy is limited, most studies focus on multicultural counseling competencies (Haddock et al., 2020). Brown et al. (2014) found through critical incident analysis that counselor education which incorporated tenets of andragogy and active learning facilitated the development of multicultural counseling and social justice competencies among counselors-in-training (CITs). Erby (2019) also used critical incident analysis and determined that a multicultural counseling experiential group grounded in andragogical principles and placed early in CITs' training experiences prompted increased reflection and awareness. Giegerich et al. (2020) found that a roleplay exercise involving collaborations of CITs and sign language interpreting students to practice serving deaf clients partially addressed three of the four MSJCC aspirational competencies – attitudes, beliefs,

knowledge, and action – and three of the four domains – counselor self-awareness, counseling relationship, and counseling and advocacy interventions.

Active learning engages students in activities and reflection about the experience (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Chickering and Gamson (1987) included active learning among principles for good practice in higher education, asserting that students should integrate what they learn into their worldview by processing what they learn, connecting it to their past and using it in life. A myriad of techniques exist, ranging from simple activities such as brief surveys and think-pair-share to more extensive ones such as internships (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), presentations, role plays, or debates (Lammers & Murphy, 2002).

Reflective education is a teaching approach for addressing students' self-awareness and personal values. Drawing from literature on the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), reflective education is a mode of facilitating self-awareness to result in new knowledge and improved skills (Rosin, 2015). Collins and Pieterse (2007) recommend using critical incident analysis to increase students' cultural competence. A critical incident involves reflective learning in which students acknowledge a significant event, discuss their internal process of the event, reflect on their behavior and affective experience, understand the learning moment, and choose a new stance. A guided imagery activity may serve as a critical incident to encourage students' critical self-reflection through active learning and reflective education.

Guided Imagery

Guided imagery (GI) is a trans-disciplinary technique with distinct purposes depending on its use. A GI exercise is a "program of directed thoughts and suggestions that guide your imagination" (Jost, 2004, p. 13). The imagery is descriptive and intended to engage multiple senses (Kress et al., 2013). GI has applications in healthcare (Farrugia & Fetter, 2009; Pearson, 1994;

Utay & Miller, 2006). GI also has applications in higher education to build students' critical thinking through perspective-taking and empathy.

Guided Imagery in Education

Educators use GI to support students' critical thinking by encouraging active perspective-taking via scenarios that offer a worldview different from their own (Galyean, 1981). Use of GI can amplify empathy toward those different from oneself (Wheatley et al., 1989), making it a promising tool for teaching cultural awareness. Perspective-taking requires students to consider how someone is affected by a situation. Taking another's perspective can, in some cases, increase one's desire to assist. One example is a GI which prompts students to take the perspective of a person of color experiencing microaggressions and other oppression in career-related scenarios such as workplace interactions and job interviews (Cureton et al., 2020).

Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000) found that perspective-taking decreased undergraduates' stereotypic biases and reduced in-group bias. Participants who were prompted to believe they had a high power status were less inclined to adopt another's perspective. High power led participants to comprehend less how others see, think, and feel. A GI may address the topic of oppression through perspective-taking and empathy about oppressed groups.

Heterosexist Guided Imagery. Henderson and Murdock (2012) developed a heterosexist guided imagery (HGI) to encourage personal reflection and expand students' sociological imagination. The authors explained this idea:

This script was developed considering the suggestions put forth by (Wheatley et al., 1989) to use creative powers of imagery for building a scenario to which students could relate while encouraging personal interpretation. The purpose of the activity was not to have students imagine what it would be like to be gay in today's society, but instead, to

imagine what it would be like to live in a world where being gay was the norm and being straight was abnormal. That is, the activity took the majority of students into a world where they were the minority, just as they are (i.e., heterosexual), where all of the stereotypes, stigmas, and unequal treatment were directed at straight people (pp. 187-188).

Henderson and Murdock (2012) subsequently evaluated the HGI as a transformative learning tool in an introductory sociology course to invoke discussion of sociological concepts and to build empathy for LGB people. Undergraduate students reported imagining feeling powerless about experiencing discrimination based on sexual orientation. The researchers concluded students experienced *sociological imagination*, or socialization by taking the role of the "other" (Mead, 1934), and the HGI was an effective teaching tool for integrating course concepts and material. A full script for the HGI is available in the original article (Henderson & Murdock, 2012). Readers will note the script focuses exclusively on heterosexism and sexual/affectional identities and not on cisgenderism and other identities in the broader queer community. Thus, we focused the study and article on heterosexism.

A few publications address an HGI or similar tool in training. Hillman and Martin (2002) found that a fictional scenario depicting an alien planet with dominant culture-centered social norms applied to heterosexual people and served to increase positive attitudes toward lesbians and gays among U.S. undergraduate students in a psychology course. Researchers applied the same scenario with college students in India and produced similar results (Ahuja et al., 2018). However, Israel and Hackett (2004) found that students reported more negative attitudes toward lesbians and gays after experiencing an HGI-like tool. The authors surmised that the experiential nature of the

tool prompted students to face their own negative stances more honestly, which allowed for more accurate post-assessment results.

A need remains for further research on GI as a teaching technique in counselor education. Several conceptual descriptions of GIs for counselor education exist, namely activities for teaching clinical concerns such as diagnosis (Kress et al., 2014) and eating disorders (DeLucia-Waack, 1999). Arredondo and Arciniega (2001) described using a GI on immigrant or refugee experiences to address multicultural counseling competencies (Sue et al., 1992). Despite the promising intersection between a GI activity – an andragogical tool for active and reflective learning – and the current MSJCCs, counselor ethics, and CACREP standards, Israel and Hackett (2004) remains the only published research on GI in counselor training. Notably, their study included non-counseling students and utilized quantitative research to compare information-based (i.e., lectures, videos) and attitude-based (i.e., a GI) teaching techniques.

Kress and colleagues (2014) specified that more qualitative research is needed to examine counseling students' experiences and perceptions of GI teaching activities. Researchers have called for expanded study on HGI-like teaching techniques beyond existing undergraduate samples (Ahuja et al., 2018; Hillman & Martin, 2002), and Israel and Hackett (2004) recommended qualitative inquiries to examine counseling students learning to serve LGB clients. A qualitative exploration of CITs' experiences with a published HGI activity would enhance understanding in counselor education about the utility of this active and reflective learning andragogical tools for enhancing awareness of heterosexism. The purpose of the current narrative study was to deeply explore students' intraphysic and collective process of engaging in the HGI and reflecting on its appropriateness for counselor training. The research question asked: What do students' stories say about their experience with an HGI in a counseling course?

Method

Fraser's (2004) line-by-line narrative analysis provided a suitable method for the current research question. This method derives from a critical paradigm informed by feminist and other theories in which reality is (a) defined through power struggles including privilege and oppression, (b) becomes known through examination of social structures, and (c) can be altered by research (Lincoln et al., 2011). Narrative inquiry allows researchers to understand individuals' experiences within a sociocultural context (Riessman, 2008), such as those in an HGI and a class. This approach supported exploration of how students described their HGI experience by studying their chosen terminology, to whom they assigned power, and how they described change over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Applying the critical paradigm to students' stories acknowledged that narratives can challenge social norms like those based in heterosexism (Fraser, 2004).

Roles of the Researchers

The first author, a PhD student in Counselor Education and Supervision at the time, designed the study, recruited participants, collected data, and served as co-analyst. The second author, a PhD student at the time, served as co-analyst. The third author, a faculty member with published research on guided imagery in education, served as auditor. We engaged in reflexivity to bolster trustworthiness: reflecting early and often throughout the study via journaling and co-analyst discussions.

I (first author) am a member of the LGB community and identify as bisexual/pansexual/queer. I held potential biases in support of the HGI as someone who has (a) experienced and witnessed some of the oppression portrayed, (b) observed the mental health impact of oppression, and (c) seeks to promote individual learning and systemic change. My mix of reactions upon first reading the HGI and during analysis included surprise, concern, hope, and skepticism. I (second

author) identify as a cisgender, heterosexual woman. Potential biases I held in support of the HGI resulted from (a) my generational identity and belief that students would be more accepting and knowledgeable about prejudice enacted against the LGB community, (b) a counselor who is aware of my need for further training on experiences of LGB community members, and (c) a counselor educator (in training at the time of analysis) who seeks to instill and promote client advocacy in coursework. I (third author) identify as a cisgender, heterosexual woman. Potential biases I held in support of the HGI resulted from (a) an expectation that counseling students would be open and thoughtful about the experiences of others, particularly a marginalized population, and (b) my experience as a faculty member in counselor education for eighteen years observing graduate students' investment in advocacy within their communities.

Participants and Data Collection

Data collection began following approval from the university Institutional Review Board and research aligned with the ACA Code of Ethics (2014). Criterion and convenience sampling aligned with the study purpose (Miles et al., 2014). The sample included students in two sections of a graduate counseling course – *Orientation to Clinical Counseling* – in the western United States. This course was selected due to its introductory nature: it was less likely that students had already been exposed to program-specific content on heterosexism that is present in other courses. Thus, the activity represented an initial collective exploration of this topic for CITs.

The first author narrated and recorded the HGI on an audio device for consistent delivery. To address power and ethics, students had the option after hearing the HGI to provide consent for study participation or engage in an alternative activity. Neither activity was graded, and all students opted to participate in the research. The instructor was not present, and doctoral students who were

trained in the HGI and in qualitative focus group procedures, but who were not connected to the course, facilitated the HGI and research activities.

Narrative approaches call for a wide range of sample sizes. The study's question and purpose concern the individual experience and collective narrative surrounding heterosexism as co-constructed among students in a class community. Mid-scale and larger samples serve to understand a collective narrative (Creswell, 2013) or to deconstruct certain discourses (Fraser, 2004). One type of purposeful sampling is convenience sampling, which we used to target recruitment of CITs in this course (Merriam, 2009). The total sample was 19 students: 8 students in one course section and 11 in another. A sample size under 20 comprising two classroom learning communities leverages the power of the method in that "line-by-line narrative analysis produces such fine-grained 'data'" (Fraser, 2004, p. 186). Due to an administrative oversight, only the second section completed a demographic questionnaire of mostly open-ended questions. All 11 students in the second section identified as White and 7 identified as female and 4 as male. Ages ranged from 23 to 49 years: most students ($n = 7$) were in their twenties, and 3 were in their thirties or forties. One student did not provide an age.

The consent, activity, and data collection occurred in the respective classrooms for each course section. A defining feature of narrative studies is the use of multiple forms of data to assemble human stories (Creswell, 2013). Two types of data were collected: one was individual, written reflections and the other was focus group interviews. This combination of individual telling and collective co-construction addressed Fraser's (2004) integration of intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural interactions in narrative analysis.

Individual reflections operated as "field texts" such as those recorded in a journal (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 80). Students completed the reflection by writing responses to

prompts informed by narrative inquiry. These three prompts were devised and revised in research team conversations with the intention of addressing the temporal nature of students' experiences with the phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the HGI:

1. Reflecting on the beginning of the guided imagery, please describe your experience.

2. Reflecting on the imagery, was there a moment that stood out to you? Please describe.

3. Following the imagery, what are your thoughts and feelings?

Participants then engaged in a one-hour focus group to collectively express their experiences of the HGI and explore its use in a counseling class. These discussions aligned with the socially constructed nature and the relatively shared experience of the HGI activity (Riessman, 2008). They involved these questions: 1) What are your reactions to this guided imagery being used in your course? 2) What impact do you imagine it could have on counseling students as individuals? 3) What impact do you imagine it could have on a class community?

Data Analysis

The co-analysts used Fraser's (2004) process to complete narrative data analysis. This established process involves seven phases: (1) hearing the stories, experiencing each other's emotions; (2) transcribing the material; (3) interpreting individual transcripts; (4) scanning across different domains of experience; (5) linking the personal with the political; (6) looking for commonalities and differences among participants; and (7) writing academic narratives about personal stories. We detail our application of this analytical process to the current study.

The first two phases involved noting affective responses while listening to audio recordings and reading and re-reading transcriptions. During phase 3 – interpreting individual transcripts – we used NVivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2015) to conduct initial interpretation of each individual reflection independently from each other, then together, noting in particular students'

chosen words, potential meanings, and contradictions. We repeated this process with the two focus group transcriptions.

Phase four and phase five served to explore participants' experiences across life domains, then in connection with sociopolitical power structures. For timeliness, one co-analyst conducted phase four while the other conducted phase five. We then presented our emergent reactions and recommendations upon hearing the other's work. Phase four involved scanning across domains of experience: intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural, and structural aspects of stories. The co-analysts considered the participants' thoughts and feelings expressed individually (written reflections) and those expressed in relationships (focus group), as well as emerging popular culture narratives. Phase five serves to discern dominant discourses as potential frameworks to understand the stories. This involved linking students' individual and class stories with relevant social narratives, particularly those about oppression and lived experiences of LGB people.

Fraser's (2004) narrative method contains two final phases. In phase six, we identified commonalities and differences among and between participants. These surfaced for individuals and sections. Patterns that emerged guided final themes. Phase seven involved drafting narratives about the stories, first separately as co-analysts, and then together. We determined how common plots unfolded and the material environment mediated students' experiences of the HGI. We then critically examined our decisions about foci of the storied findings, including adequate attention on perspectives that challenge the research assumptions.

Trustworthiness

We used multiple methods to enhance trustworthiness. Thorough reflexivity informed our researcher stances (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, the two co-analysts adopted the practice of bridling (Stutey et al., 2020; Vagle, 2010) for intentional reflection throughout analysis and writing

about our notions on heterosexism and the HGI. Our reflexive process was both individual and collective in that we shared and discussed our initial and subsequent introspective reflections with each other during ongoing analysis meetings.

Triangulation involved identifying themes across two types of data – individual reflections and group interviews – and through independent evaluation and consensual validation of co-analysts (Creswell, 2013). The third author served as an auditor, reviewing the audit trail and the preliminary and final conclusions of the researchers. The audit trail consisted of a document mapping the location of files related to the design plan – Fraser's (2004) article, a step-by-step procedural document, and a draft of the Method section; files containing study data (i.e., demographic questionnaires and coded written reflections and focus group transcriptions); analytic memos; and emergent findings. The auditor reviewed the files and confirmed the co-analysts followed the design plan. She followed the researchers' interpretations and provided feedback on the initial draft of the findings, particularly regarding participants' emotional expressions that supported the themes and suggestions about organization of subthemes. Overall, she confirmed that the final results represented the data through the critical narrative lens used. Finally, the manuscript offers a fairly rich, thick description about the context, process, and findings so readers can ascertain transferability to their contexts (Merriam, 2009).

Findings

The analysis produced findings to answer the research question: What do students' stories say about their experience with an HGI in a counseling course? As shown in Table 1, findings from the written reflections and focus groups included three themes, each with two or three subthemes. The first theme – *Safe and/vs. comfortable* – emerged from students' narratives about lack of safety or comfort for minorities and for themselves as students. *Rights and doing what's*

right – captures the struggle to align national narratives with students' own perceptual reality and to reconcile their behavior with conflicting guidance from others. The final theme – *(Re)defining self and other* – concerned personal and professional identity.

Table 1

Narrative Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Unsafe and Uncomfortable	It is unsafe to be in the minority.
	This topic is uncomfortable. Is it safe to talk about?
Rights and Doing What's Right	Questioning America as land of the free
	Struggling to know the right thing to do
(Re)defining Self and Other	My stance is who I am.
	Acknowledging or minimizing privilege
	Who are we as developing counselors?

Unsafe and Uncomfortable

Participants' narratives displayed two subthemes about perceptions of lacking safety and experiencing discomfort. In one, students focused on the lived experience of people from minoritized communities, who they called "minorities." In the other, they described their experiences as students. Both subthemes arose in individual reflections and class discussions.

It Is Unsafe to Be in the Minority

Students described feeling mixed emotions including shock, confusion, and fear as they adopted the role of a targeted minority during the HGI. As they recalled entering and proceeding through the HGI experience, their reflections first focused on being "in the minority." Many described feeling alone quickly after realizing that their orientation placed them in the minority,

and some described later searching to find others like them in the imagery as it progressed. Their feelings of aloneness prompted fear. Students perceived the minority experience – during the HGI and what they imagine others have in real life – as emotionally unsafe or violent. Thus, being in the minority, an experience that some mentioned was new to them, was scary in and of itself. Simply being among more people unlike them than similar to them was uncomfortable and threatening. One student described feeling his privileges "ripped away" and having to "fight for them back and justify who I am to society." Another concluded: "It is very shameful to be a part of a minority whose sexuality is seen by the majority as disgusting and sinful."

This Topic Is Uncomfortable. Is It Safe to Talk about?

Their feelings of being unsafe or uncomfortable in the storyline of the HGI extended into the classroom. Some looked for an agenda in the HGI activity: "It was so jarring, then naturally my intuition says 'Are we being manipulated or coerced?'" Students shared their surprise about HGI content because the HGI differed from their preconceptions of guided imageries as peaceful experiences and also because homosexuality is a "touchy subject" to discuss in a classroom and in larger society:

> I, I uhh, teach a class about sex and relationships and we talk about homosexuality. And it's ahh, it makes people upset, so umm and uhh, whether you go one side or the other, you know. And it's really hard it's really hard to walk a ground of unbias. That's almost impossible. It really is.

Rights and Doing What's Right

The second theme concerns both civil and other rights and making the right decisions. When discussing the HGI, participants challenged the dominant narrative of the U.S. as a welcoming place that guarantees equality and rights for all: "I think part of our problem is we are

inundated with this information as a society [that] America has solved all of its problems with bias, with prejudice." Many students described the HGI as a criticism of American culture: "The single question/moment that stood out was the 'what's wrong with you' statement. That is clearly the way difference/diversity has been handled in American Culture." A few students zeroed in on the cultural critique of the HGI as a beneficial attribute for a class activity and pointed out that "Because the imagery is such a strong mirror of many stereotypical attitudes that have dominated American culture in the recent past (and may still do so today), it's a useful exercise in turning the point-of-view."

A specific conversation emerged about rights as students discussed freedom from oppression related to regional culture in the U.S. One student mused: "I'm wondering if where the university was within the nation that this was used if that would make a difference. Like, maybe students over on east coast have a completely different response than we do right now or in the south…" Another student addressed racism: "I think that's regional also, because a friend of mind moved down to Florida and came running right back because people were still using the N-word and they were teaching their small children the N-word. He came flying back out of there so fast it wasn't funny: 'I don't belong here.'"

The second subtheme about "right" emerged as students struggled to define the right thing to do amidst values conflicts that they were experiencing. Students wrestled outwardly between staying "neutral" or taking action: "It's so hard to be neutral place…so it's about how to get people to think in terms where they don't rely on presumptions and cultural assumptions and patterns and models." Some students described the emotional reflection involved in this struggle as they reflected on the internal dialogue they experienced while proceeding through the HGI as an oppressed sexual minority:

It seemed very unfair, prejudice and hard hearted. I wondered why others felt the need to

go out of their way to make life miserable. I'm glad that I have never participated in such

cruel and senseless activity. I wonder how I would respond if I witnessed such activity.

Would I speak up for the minority and try to defend them?

(Re)defining Self and Other

Students' narratives contained stories of defining and/or redefining themselves and others

via their stances on the topic of homophobia, their own awareness (or lack of) privilege, and their

conceptualizations of what being a counselor entails in the context of oppression. The HGI activity

prompted several students to self-identify as heterosexual but not anti-gay in the written individual

reflections they completed following the activity and before the discussion one example stated,

"That's part of the reason it was hard for me to get there *(to get into the imagery)* because I don't

have those feelings toward that population." Some stances accompanied emotional reflections:

"When I think of how homosexuals must feel, it makes me angry and embarrassed that many

heteros feel this way." Co-analysts coded these and similar quotes that emerged from written

reflections and groups discussions as *incredulousness* because students seemed focused on their

own surprised stance that this heterosexist society oppresses LGB people: "Dominant culture feels

the need or thinks it has the right to control, change or 'fix' any minority group at all. It's just

astounding." Notably, one student described a change in beliefs:

Before this imagery, homosexuality went against my religious beliefs but the bottom line

is that homosexuals are people with feelings, wants, and desires. And who am I or who is

society to take away what makes them happy or authentic?

The second subtheme on identities concerned privilege. Although only one participant used

the word "privileges" verbatim, students' reflections and discussions centered their identities

related to the privilege they seemed to recognize anew upon experiencing the HGI or continued to deny, if subconsciously. Some students noted that the HGI activity increased their awareness of oppression. One described the inner dialogue and emotional response they had while experiencing the HGI:

> When the narrator was talking about world/society and said 'it's expected' that you marry someone of the same sex. That really allowed me to think and to feel what that would be like. I could really feel 'But I don't want to do that' and a feeling of shame that might go along with that.

Some students minimized their privilege. One student concluded that empathizing is their only role in oppression: "I have never felt marginalized or outcast and cannot 'picture' what it would feel like in such a short exercise. I can only try to empathize." Another acknowledged privilege as a reason for an emotional disconnect: "It is difficult to feel what others are describing as discriminating, being a White male." Another minimization was denying differences between the privileged and oppressed groups displayed in the HGI, such as this students' retrospective evaluation of the HGI as a class activity:

> It is a good opportunity to educate people to show them that this is what they are going through and we're not so different from you. Like the part about 'You can't love the person or have a family or have goals.' But that is something that everyone can relate to. It doesn't matter your orientation, ya know.

The third subtheme involved professional identity. As students reflected on the HGI experience, they looked forward into their future roles as counselors vis-à-vis their understanding of professional values in the counseling field: "I'm going to have to internally process myself as to what I'm doing on the inside as a counselor and how that pertains to the person that I really need

to affect." One student imagined their responsibility with future clients who might be struggling to accept someone else coming out: "They want to be able to process that in a way that will allow them to continue to have this good relationship with the other person." Another summarized a collective narrative of the students' shared HGI experience which centered on overlapping individual and professional identities as current peers in the counseling program and future colleagues in the counseling field:

> As a class, it's not really about saying 'Well, this is right or wrong.' It is about saying, 'Well, we could potentially work with a family where you want to help the individual who is being discriminated against because they are identifying themself (sic) as homosexual.' But at the same time, they want to have relationships with people who are imposing their values on them. And so how do we help the bigger picture? How do we work - and that's the same true in the class - how do we work as colleagues and as peers with varying backgrounds on ideas and families and histories? …It's not really about being right or wrong, it's about how to communicate effectively so that we can understand each other and through that being able to let go of some our bias. That's really how you process things anyways by hearing about their perspectives.

Discussion

There are numerous suggestions in the literature for increasing students' awareness through reflective practice and active learning strategies, but scant previous research concerned the impact of guided imagery in counselor education. The current study's aim was to explore CITs' stories about experiencing an HGI. Overall, the study adds to the literature on the utility of an HGI for addressing heterosexism and particularly underscores existing literature about the transformative potential of andragogy aimed at critical reflection, the centrality of students' perceived emotional

safety, and the capacity to deepen professional identity development through multicultural training. The study's findings also add to the literature concerning what the term *active learning* entails.

The theme Unsafe and Uncomfortable represented students' descriptions of discomfort or uncertain safety for themselves in the classroom and/or for LGB people and people of color. These feelings are similar to those LGB people have when faced with heterosexism (Eady et al., 2011; Israel et al., 2008). Some participants expressed concern that LGB students might be hurt by the HGI activity, though several saw it as a helpful teaching tool. This is in accordance with Hays and colleagues' (2007) finding that CITs preferred having dialogue about sexual minorities in what they believe is a safe classroom environment. This finding demonstrates the utility of the HGI for CITs to experience and express empathy toward LGB people experiencing heterosexism. As with studies of this HGI or a similar tool used in undergraduate classrooms, the CITs engaged in perspective taking, imagining the marginalization described in the imagery (Henderson & Murdock, 2012).

This finding also echoes a longstanding critique in education about the inherent limitation of spaces that students experience as safe and comfortable. Robert Boostrom (1997, 1998) used the work of three female educators – Christine Hawkins, Donna H. Kerr, and Judy Pollak – to summarize a challenge for educators to interrogate the use of the term *safe space*. Although educational safe spaces may feel comfortable and stress-free, they limit critical thinking and transformative growth thereby stifling individual learning and societal change.

Part of the second theme concerned deciding the right thing to do and the third thing involved establishing and, for some, negotiating one's identity. Many participants were unsure how to react to situations in the HGI given their own conflicting views and beliefs. They reflected

on past experiences, reevaluated their responses to heterosexism, and expressed uncertainty about if and how to be supportive in the future. Some noted that the HGI challenged their beliefs and prompted them to wrestle with their heterosexual privilege.

Students' concern may indicate their awareness of LGB oppression couples with a lack of confidence and competence to address it (Graham et al., 2012). Feeling helpless about counseling LGB clients while experiencing a brief scenario from the oppressed perspective may have led students to feel disempowered. Some students cautioned the focus group facilitators about using the HGI. At times, students expressed anger or defensiveness, questioned the intentions of the researcher or facilitator, and appeared to negotiate their relationships as a class as if group status was threatened. Some students reacted by taking a role of protector, possibly as a defensive response to reduce vulnerability and/or to reestablish empowerment or heterosexual dominance. DiAngelo (2011) described *White fragility* as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" and explained one move as "the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt" (p. 54). Sapp (2017) argued that a similar phenomenon, *heterosexual fragility*, underlies anger and "pushback from students" who are heterosexual (p. 7). This may partly explain reactive and cautionary responses among this and other samples (i.e., Israel & Hackett, 2004).

Among the identities that students described exploring in the (Re)defining Self and Other theme was that of their growing professional self. Erby (2019) concluded that a multicultural experiential group that occurred early in CITs' training "can capitalize on receptivity in emerging professional identity" (p. 248) as outlined in Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) earlier work. The current study's findings provide another example of this potential impact of early multicultural placement (i.e., in an orientation course). It also appears to highlight the complex relationship

between individual identity (i.e., personal demographics such as sexual orientation and one's stance or belief that may be experiencing clarification) and CITs' professional identity. This finding seems to support infusion throughout the counseling curriculum as an approach to multicultural competency training.

Finally, these findings support an expanded definition of active learning. A traditional definition focused on cognitive development such as understanding, recall, and problem-solving (Brown et al., 1999). The *Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (Fry et al., 2003) offers a broader definition: "a process of engaging with the learning task at both the cognitive and affective level" (p. 432). This broader definition received support from a comparison by Young et al. (2009) of four types of lectures ranging from fully passive to active learning. Similar to results from a lecture involving student discussion, the author's found a lecture including case studies or videos without actual student interaction produced improved learning over the standard passive lecture. The authors concluded that deep learning does not necessitate true interactivity. Some deep learning did appear to occur via this HGI experience. To one degree or another, students described experiencing self-awareness of their affective responses and values, the challenge of decision-making, critical appraisals of contextual inequality and oppression, and complex personal and professional identity development. Notably, this deep learning did not entail more typical and involved experiential or active learning techniques such as role play and cultural immersion experiences. The study's findings have several implications for counselor educators and supervisors and for counseling researchers.

Implications for Counselor Educators

Counselor educators understand the importance of guiding CITs' self-awareness, including reflection on their values, to avoid imposition onto future clients. In practice, this can be difficult

to teach. Counselor educators may hesitate to use classroom activities that challenge students' beliefs, particularly if instructors are concerned about impact on teaching evaluations and/or tenure and promotion. Suggestions for counselor educators concern ways to establish a conducive culture and to facilitate the HGI toward the aims of reducing heterosexism and ultimately improving counseling services for LGB clients.

Counselor educators should consider how they can establish a culture for themselves and students in the classroom and beyond that is conducive to a successful HGI experience. Andragogical practice can involve students' self-directed learning (Fry et al., 2009) such as CITs curating their own class rules of engagement early in the semester and working together to define and resolve an identified problem. Applied to this activity, an instructor can provide an overview of the course and highlight some of the more challenging or emotionally charged topics that will be discussed; then they can facilitate a class discussion about students' and their commitment to uphold counseling ethics and values when covering those topics.

Arao and Clemens (2013) offered several practical suggestions for shifting dialogues on heterosexism and other diversity topics from expectations for safe spaces to brave spaces. Brave spaces are characterized by individual vulnerability, diversity of thought, conflict not prohibited but managed by the instructor; they, therefore, allow students to continuously revise their viewpoints through the process of relating to one another and the course concepts (Boostrom, 1998; Osborne, 1997). Arao and Clemens' suggestions (2013) involve introducing and discussing this concept of brave space early on and then using the concept as a guide to establish ground rules that differ from those typically set up for safe spaces, which they believe "may contribute to the conflation of safety and comfort and restrict participant engagement and learning" (p. 143). Counselor educators can prompt students to revisit the brave space ground rules as they anticipate

the upcoming HGI activity and conversation about heterosexism. Additionally, it would be helpful for counselor educators to create a program culture beyond individual courses. A supportive group of peers could consult with instructors about creative and experiential teaching practices to ensure student learning. Counselor educators can develop a culture to support experiential activities that challenge and encourage personal and professional development by first "identify[ing] systemic factors that act as barriers to their students' or clients' development" (Lewis et al., 2003, p. 1).

In alignment with student-directed learning, groups of CITs can work together after experiencing the HGI to define the problem of heterosexism and to identify possible resolutions connected with course content. For instance, in the case of an Orientation course, students would explore the history of heterosexist counseling practice, present-day standards of ethical practice and counselor professional identity, and the impact of heterosexism and LGB-affirmative cultural and counseling practices on LGB clients. Anticipating an opportunity to problem-solve may also relieve some uncertainty or discomfort for students and provide dedicated class time to address values and other conflicts that may arise when questioning national narratives, what to do about heterosexism, and their own personal and professional identities.

The second area of implications focuses on facilitating the HGI and discussing students' HGI experiences. The original HGI script (Henderson & Murdock, 2012) begins with a brief introduction and invitation to relax; and Kress et al. (2014) offered wording with similar aims which can be adapted for the HGI. The original HGI script did not contain discussion questions for instructors to use after the HGI; however, counselor educators could adapt the written reflection prompts from either the original study or the current one and/or begin a full class debriefing discussion with suggestions for general questions from Pearson, (2003): "What was the experience

like for you? What part of the image was most vivid for you? What feelings were you aware of? Do you remember any thoughts that occurred to you during the imagery?" (p. 119).

Sapp (2017) noted that managing heterosexual fragility requires "a skilled facilitator" if the goal is to support others in challenging their "long-held belief systems" (p. 7). Counselor educators may find the concept of affective constellations (Teyber & Teyber, 2016) useful if students respond similarly to their HGI experiences with feelings such as sadness or anger. An affective constellation is "a sequence of interrelated feelings" that occur at the same time (p. 204). The feeling demonstrated outwardly is connected to underlying feelings that are stronger. Two common constellations are 1) anger, sadness, shame and 2) sadness, anger, guilt. Students could have presented as sad or angry about the HGI with deeper feelings of shame or guilt about heterosexism and oppression. Teyber and Teyber (2016) offered a three-step process for using affective constellations to address countertransference. Cureton and Clemens (2015) applied this process to professional practice and training regarding suicide and offered a figure and case example for applying the process to enhance self-awareness during supervision. Similarly, counselor educators can use this process and example to address students' affective responses to the HGI.

The three resultant themes demonstrate the emotional engagement of the CITs with the HGI as well as their apparent desire to consider appropriate individual actions or responses and the broader professional responsibilities counselors have regarding heterosexism. The implications of the current findings involve suggestions for class and program culture and facilitation to 1) prompt deep and challenging reflection on one's emotional response and empathy about heterosexism's harmful psychological and other consequences and to 2) explore and name concrete actions CITs and counselors can take as individuals and as a collective profession to

improve service delivery to LGB clients. Notions of self-directed learning and brave spaces along with set-up and debriefing techniques such as the affective constellations for countertransference process should prompt diverse thought and emotion while welcoming vulnerability and openness to change. Counselor educators can guide students to experience heterosexism (approximately, in the form of an imagery exercise) and to grapple within themselves and with each other about the impact of heterosexism on clients they will serve, the needs of LGB clients, and the role of counselors in combating heterosexism in society.

Limitations

Potential limitations of the current study include different facilitators who were not the course instructor, limited data collection, and homogeneity in the sample. Two people facilitated the focus groups using the same instructions but potentially different facilitation styles which could have influenced the discussion. We sought individual data in written form to allow introspection prior to the focus group. The discussion offered a communication exchange, but individual interviews might have elicited more descriptive and less socially desirable responses. Not all participants were asked to provide demographic information. Some offered information in their written and focus group comments, but researchers did not ask students to disclose their sexual orientation. Given the influence of one's sexual orientation on perspectives about heterosexism, the lack of this information neglected important context for analysis. Future research utilizing other types of samples such as unique, maximum variation, or theoretical sampling (Merriam, 2009) and demographic procedures requiring more intimate disclosure should add richness to this line of study.

The sample was relatively homogeneous: it derived from two course sections within one counseling program, albeit at different campuses. The counseling program espouses values such

as multicultural responsiveness and social justice, and its student body is predominately white and female. More diversity in individual demographics (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) and in counseling programs and regions of the country may have yielded different results. The purpose of this study was to explore the use of the HGI in a counseling graduate course and this, along with the stated values of the program, may have had a social desirability effect wherein participants felt more compelled to respond more favorably to the exercise than other students might. It is important to note that the published HGI script focused solely on heterosexism and sexual/affectional identities not on cisgenderism and gender identities, so transferability of findings to the latter topic of multicultural competency is not appropriate.

Directions for Future Research

The current methods and findings provide several directions for future research, particularly related to HGI facilitation, class make-up, contextual realities, and direct impact on LGB people. As noted, the HGI in this study was not facilitated by the course instructor so as to decrease the potential for social desirability based on the student-faculty relationship. Given the centrality of trusting relationships in counseling and counselor education (Purswell, 2019), it would be interesting to study the impact of student-faculty rapport on students' HGI experiences. It seems imperative in future studies, particularly those involving individual data collection (i.e., written reflections and/or interviews), to gather demographics on students' sexual/affectional identities. Samples with students from varying race/ethnic, religious, and national origin groups might demonstrate intersecting cultural concerns based on heterosexism and/or homophobia in their different cultures. The students in this study pointed out U.S. regional cultures differences; thus, comparisons with diverse geographical locations may also be illuminating. This qualitative narrative study provides a foundation for a quantitative study of the HGI's impact on CITs'

multicultural counseling competencies, beliefs about LGB people, and related factors. It captures perspectives of CITs early in their counselor training, offering findings that were necessarily influenced by this stage of counselor development. Relatedly, another promising direction of future research entails the impact of the HGI on counselor practice, perhaps via samples including CITs in Practicum/Internship or practicing counselors.

Conclusion

The use of a heterosexist guided imagery as an andragogical tool created a constructive classroom atmosphere as participants who were early in their counselor training programs reported their beliefs were challenged during and after the activity. The findings indicate that the HGI experience prompted cognitive dissonance, perspective-taking, and self-reflection as a transformative learning experience (Mezirow, 1997). Participants struggled at times while reevaluating their perspectives, reporting and demonstrating cognitive dissonance during and after the activity. Counselor educators can encourage students' self-awareness by implementing an HGI. Future research could examine these activities in other academic programs.

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