From Readiness to Action: Social Justice Training in Practicum

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Abstract

Social justice is an imperative within counseling and is recognized through the American Counseling Association's code of ethics, nationally endorsed competencies, and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. The authors completed a phenomenological study exploring the experience of five master's-level counseling students in their practicum course relative to their development of a socially just counseling approach. The authors identified themes to provide a textural-structural description of how students experienced the transition towards social action. Moving from readiness to action encompassed previous experiences, the learning community, and change agents including awareness, responsibility, motivation, and comfort. Implications for educators and supervisors of professional counselors are provided.

Keywords

Author's Notes

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Social justice is a prominent force in the counseling field, often coined the "fifth force" (Peters & Luke, 2021; Ratts & Wood, 2011) and recognized as a core professional value (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). The infusion of social justice has been codified through the ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014), outlined in nationally endorsed professional competencies (Toporek & Daniels, 2018; Ratts et al., 2016), and prescribed by educational accreditation standards (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015). Escalation of hate crimes and racial violence toward people of color lend further credence to this priority while reaffirming the historical realities of oppression and marginalization of many in the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2020; Jeung et al., 2021). It is within this tumultuous landscape that counselor educators are called to prepare counselors to meet the pressing demands of an increasingly complex and diverse society. The field has responded with greater infusion of social justice into pedagogy, including theory integration (Hayden & Crockett, 2020; Singh et al., 2020), teaching strategies (Baker et al., 2020; Hilert & Tirado, 2019) and supervision approaches (Dollarhide et al., 2020; King et al., 2020).

For the purpose of this study, social justice is defined as "a process of acknowledging systemic societal inequities and oppression while acting responsibly to eliminate the systemic oppression in the forms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other biases in clinical practice both on individual and distributive levels" (Odegard & Vereen, 2010, p. 130). A social justice perspective "reflects a fundamental valuing of fairness and equity in resources, rights, and treatment of marginalized individuals and groups of people" (Constantine et al., 2007, p. 24). Professionals operating under a social justice paradigm recognize that various forms of oppression and environmental stressors contribute to psychological and emotional difficulties of individuals

(Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). Consequently, a shift has occurred in both the conceptualizing of client distress and corresponding interventions that professionals employ.

While strides have been made toward a greater emphasis on the teaching of social justice theory and principles to counselors-in-training, less clear is how students apply this knowledge. Furthermore, the actual process that students undergo when developing a social justice identity is still nascent (Goodman et al., 2018; Hays, 2020; Caldwell & Vera, 2010). While didactic instruction on social justice theory is necessary, further steps must be made. As outlined in the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) (Ratts et al., 2016), knowledge, skills, and attitudes have value only to the extent that it translates to meaningful action. A common stage in a student's program for action to occur is during practicum.

Practicum is often the first opportunity for students in counselor education programs to work with actual clients (CACREP, 2015). Frequently, this point in training presents unique challenges, often producing significant emotional and psychological demands on students (Rønnestad et al., 2019; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013). Indeed, the experience of working with clients for the first time may serve as a critical incident in the developmental process of counseling students. Furthermore, in a qualitative study of counselors in training, Gibson et al. (2010) found the integration of one's personal and professional identities to occur at the later stages of a student's program, most notably when counseling actual clients. Professional identity is inextricably tied to a social justice identity (Ratts, 2017; Ratts & Wood, 2011).

Several researchers have attempted to identify the process that counselors undergo when developing a social justice identity (Baker et al., 2020; Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Goodman et al., 2018; Inman et al., 2015; Robinson-Swartz et al., 2018). In a survey study of 274 counselors in training, Inman et al. (2015) found a positive relationship between social justice self-efficacy

beliefs and social justice interest, social justice commitment, and perceived social support for doing social justice work. The authors recommended future research to include an exploration of social justice commitment and student identity development. Robinson-Swartz et al. (2018) explored the process for developing social justice interest in seasoned licensed counselors. The authors found social justice interest to begin early in life as a "personal moral imperative" (p. 29) and identified mentorship playing a significant role. Like Inman et al. (2015), the authors recommended future exploration of social justice interest development during counselor training.

Service learning has been identified as one promising approach to supporting students' social justice identity development (Farrell et al., 2020; Goodman et al., 2018). In a study evaluating an advocacy training project for counseling master's students, the authors identified three themes arising in the process of becoming an advocate: internal grappling, building the advocacy relationship, and integrating the advocate identity (Goodman et al., 2018). Among their recommendations were for continued research on the developmental process of students' becoming social justice advocates.

Existing models of teaching and supervision provide a strong foundation to move forward in creating counselor education programs that foster social justice within the counseling profession. Such models include experiential and constructivist learning theory (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011) and developmental models (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 2016; Rønnestad et al., 2019). Within a constructivist framework, knowledge is viewed as fluid: shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces that are moderated by power. Denying absolutes, learning is seen as a collective enterprise that embraces a plurality of student perspectives while promoting openness and flexibility (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Developmental theories enable educators and supervisors to identify key markers and transition points in a trainee's professional growth. Accounting for the

ambiguity and complexity of working with diverse clients, supervisors attend to the reflective cognitive and affective capacities and limitations of the trainee to optimize growth (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 2016; Rønnestad et al., 2019). Both theories posit self-reflection and openness to multiple perspectives as crucial pathways to learning.

If social justice is to be fully actualized in the counseling profession, continued studies need to be completed that provide observable outcomes where program personnel can make informed decisions prior to incorporating approaches into their programs (Hays, 2020; Ratts & Wood, 2011). In a taskforce on best practice guidelines for teaching commissioned by the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), recommendations included greater dialogue around cultural competence and social justice playing a primary role in curriculum, with an integration across all phases of the program (Wood et al., 2016). A better understanding of this process can aid educators and supervisors in employing the appropriate strategies to assist students in the development of a social justice identity. The first step is to better understand how students are currently formulating their own perceptions of social action and the impact the practicum experience is having on this phenomenon. Based upon the existing literature and the desire to understand this phenomenon, the following question was posed: What is the master's student's experience of developing a social justice identity during their first practicum?

Methods

The primary purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the meaning students place on social justice constructs as they begin their work with clients. Van Manen (1990) wrote that a phenomenological question is one that asks the significance and meaning behind a phenomenon. A phenomenological methodology (Wertz, 2005) was chosen to provide rich description of subjective meaning students placed upon social justice constructs during their

practicum course. Wertz (2005) noted that this type of research is descriptive, employs phenomenological reductions, and explores the intentional relationships between the people and situation under study. Utilizing a phenomenological methodology provided the structure to explore relevant themes that would provide educators and supervisors with a framework to foster student development in social justice work.

Context

The study was conducted at a public institution in the Midwestern region of the United States. The counseling program at the university is CACREP accredited and the practicum experience meets the requirements set in their standards (CACREP, 2015). The practicum experience is completed on-site at the counseling training clinic. The general structure consisted of weekly, five-hour classes with a combination of live and group supervision. Groups consisting of five to six students counsel clients from the university or community during the first three hours and present their work in the last two hours. Additional requirements for the course include weekly supervision outside of the class period, completing reflective journals, leading a group at a site external to the program, writing conceptualization papers, and logging their skill usage using digital recording software. The course is experiential-based with no assigned reading. The primary purpose of this course is to practice the skills they learned in their beginning skills course.

Researchers

The lead researcher was an active supervisor in one of the sections and was blinded to the participants of the study except for the two participants he interviewed from different sections of the class. The second author was the clinical director for the training clinic and did not have any active participation with the practicum sections during the semester. Both first and second authors identify as white males. The third author is a faculty member in a different college within the same

university who identifies as a white female. Prior to commencement of this research, the protocol and procedures were accepted by the university's Institutional Review Board. The authors solicited participants during the first week of the practicum course by emailing all students who were enrolled in practicum sections.

Participants

Five individuals volunteered to be part of the study and were provided with the appropriate consent for participation. Four participants identified as female and one participant identified as male. The ages for participants ranged from the mid-twenties to the mid-thirties. Participants represented a mix of specialty areas with three school counseling and two clinical mental health students. In terms of racial/ethnic backgrounds, the majority of participants identified as white. There were no incentives offered during the solicitation process. Schreiber and Asner-Self (2011) noted that phenomenology is concerned with describing the essence of a phenomenon and Wertz (2005) contended that grounding the data in the experience is paramount. As such, we limited our pool of participants to those that were actively involved in the experience. Purposeful sampling allowed individuals to be selected that had direct experience with the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to the commencement of data collection, we established the procedures for the study, gained an understanding on personal biases, and developed questions for the first round of interviews. Procedures were developed to provide consistency between the researchers and maintain fundamental phenomenological elements throughout the study. Wertz (2005) identified several key elements that include suspending scientific assumptions about the phenomenon, gaining access that provides concrete data about individual experiences, identifying themes across these experiences, and delineating invariant characteristics of the subject matter. Hays and Wood

(2011) described how researchers can continually work to describe these themes in a meaningful manner and seek variations amongst the participant experiences that will lead to a composite textural-structural description. After each round of interviews and the focus group, the authors would individually code the transcripts for the given round and develop themes through reading the text, identifying individual meaning units within the text, and develop themes from those. Initially, the authors were focused on texture and depth of experience with later focus on the overall structure of the experience. Coding meeting were structured to explore the authors individual results and find consistent language for themes that emerged. The authors found meetings to be relatively free of disagreement and more about correctly conveying the experience being researched.

To capture the key elements of the phenomenon, two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted and a focus group was completed to provide concluding information and function as a member check. Interviews and the focus group were audio recorded and transcribed to allow for individual analysis. The authors divided the interview responsibilities and each had one or two students to interview. The first round of interviews took place at midterm and ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. The first-round questions were: (a) "As a professional, what do you see as your role in promoting fairness and equity of marginalized individuals or groups?" and (b) "What has contributed to these ideas thus far in practicum (internal factors and experiences within practicum)?" Round one questions further explored elements of knowledge, awareness, and skill based upon initial responses from participants. The first-round questions provided the data for the initial coding round where invariant meaning units (Hays & Wood, 2011) were established and a textural-structural description developed. Each author individually coded the interviews and then

came together to discuss findings. Amongst the three researchers, key concepts were identified and checked against each other's biases.

The second round of interviews commenced a few weeks prior to the end of the semester and, again, ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. The same research pairings were maintained for the second round of interviews. The second-round questions were based upon the findings and analysis results from the initial round of questioning. Given the depth of information provided by the participants during the first round of interviews, multiple follow-up questions were developed. The second-round questions were: (a) "With regards to our discussion on fairness and equity in counseling, what if anything has happened within practicum since we last talked that is significant to you?" (b) "How have your interactions with peers, supervisors, and clients in practicum informed your knowledge on social justice?" (c) "Could you further explore any conditions or environment factors within practicum that informed or facilitated your actions towards fairness and equity in counseling?" (d) "Were there any external influences that were concurrent with practicum that informed your ideals around fairness and equity in counseling? Did any prompt action on your part?" (e) "One area of interest was shifting from ideals to action in the realm of fairness and equity, at what level do you feel comfortable, responsibility, or motivated to act?" (f) "What factors contribute to your desire, comfort, responsibility to act in a social justice mindset and how?" (g) What type of dialogue or experiences promoted a sense of responsibility to question practices that do not promote fairness and equity?" and (h) "Finally, what do you see as your role in promoting fairness and equity of marginalized individuals or groups?" Again, each researcher individually coded the interviews and then came together to discuss results. A concept map was developed at this point provided a tool for the researchers to communicate relational components about the experience.

The final step of the data collection was the facilitation of a focus group with participants of the study. The second and third authors completed the focus group at the conclusion of the semester. Of the five participants, three were available to participate. The lead author did not participate in the focus group to maintain anonymity of participants through the end of the semester. The two participants that were unable to make the focus group were sent an e-mail requesting input regarding the concept map that was created. Facilitators requested further clarification of the concept map regarding (a) the change agents, (b) process of movement from ideas to action, and (c) how concurrent experiences affected the change agents. The focus group and response from one of the individuals that could not be present provided clarifications on certain relational components of the experience. Participant feedback in this final step provided assurance that key elements of the phenomenon were captured.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative inquiry demands a level of rigor that will produce results representative of the phenomenon under study. Maxwell (2010) identified two specific threats to validity: bias and reactivity. Bias refers to the preconceptions that the researchers bring into the research study and reactivity is the influence that the researcher has on the research participants and environment (Maxwell, 2010). We engaged in intensive involvement with the data, triangulation, and member checking. Intensive involvement was achieved through meetings amongst researchers, interviewing participants, individual coding, and writing memos throughout the life of the research project. This level of involvement between the three researchers provided excellent sources to triangulate data. Personal reactions and preconceptions could be discussed as the researchers came together to discuss the data. Of particular concern was how we could minimize our own biases influencing our questioning and coding. We identified several biases including our general

consensus that social justice training is an important piece in counselor development, our view of this phenomenon is from the educator role as opposed to the learner, and we believed that the program provided the conditions where social justice learning could take place. This was made possible through multiple discussions amongst the researchers. Finally, a focus group was held to determine if members would relate to the description of the phenomenon captured through their experience.

Results

The analysis of the transcripts yielded multiple themes within the experience and a structural framework for the phenomenon. The themes that emerged were past experiences, the learning community, and specific change agents that were present in the experience. All three themes supported the textural-structural description of readiness to action. Readiness to action represents the essence of the experience throughout the participants' practicum course. Salient excerpts that link these themes to the data are provided in the following sections.

Past Experiences

Each participant came into the practicum experience with experiences and beliefs regarding fairness and equity. Participants had multiple ways of describing the concept of social justice. Descriptions ranged from Participant One seeing social justice as "empowering the individual" and being able to stand up and say "No that is wrong." Participants Two, Three and Four focused on advocacy and collaborating for change at a global level. Participant Three stated that: "we're not just serving our clients but we're serving a population or a group of people that have a common experience." Each participant brought in stories that informed their ideas of social justice.

The theme, past experiences, was separated into two areas: life experiences and experiences within the graduate program. Relevant life experiences stemmed from various sources

and included time spent with family, affiliations with religious institutions, social activism, volunteering, and personal experiences of inequality. Participant Five reflected on family: "you know in the way that both of my parents raised me it was more about for me to learn to be a strong independent person but also I need, that giving back is something you should do." Participant One linked family and religion through the following statement: "Um, I mean certainly you know if you want to look at my family, we have always been, um, social justice minded, um, primarily related to our faith, um, and not that our faith has always been the same faith throughout the generations but it's always been a place via which we have done volunteer work or social justice work." Reflecting upon personal struggles, Participant Three stated: "In myself it was really just college and experiencing the struggle and the pain that it had for me that it kind of caused me but also understanding that even if I wasn't experiencing the pain and issues that it still would have been a struggle." Life experiences and experiences within the graduate program were mentioned by several participants during the study.

The graduate program where the five participants were enrolled infuses cultural elements and social justice principles throughout the curriculum. Participant One stated that "all of the coursework here has made you so very aware of um the diversity constructs and the social justice responsibility that we have." Participant Five echoed this sentiment by stating: "I think that the classes that we have taken in grad school have kind of defined this whole notion of taking an individualized approach and each of the classes does a really nice job of being multicultural." It became clear through the interviews that prior classes had provided the participants with the content and experiences that challenged reflection. Not only did the program provide the subject matter, but there was also an atmosphere promoting taking risks in their learning. Participant Two noted that "a big thing for me being in this program is that everyone is just so open and accepting

to everyone regardless of their beliefs and it's the way that we challenge each other but in a meaningful way."

Learning Community

Openness to experience and acceptance of multiple perspectives encompassed the learning community created during the practicum course. The learning community consisted of the supervisor(s), peers, clients, and concurrent experiences of the participants. The combination of entities that the learning community consisted of provided an avenue for support, knowledge construction, and skill development. Participant Five highlighted the importance that the supervisor played and how it was important just knowing that they had someone there if needed. Participant Two saw the practicum group as a collaborative team and noted that "There's never been any, like, negative put downs or anything but just being able to explore different ideas and everyone comes from a different place in life and just being able to use those ideas and being accepting to those and being willing to try stuff out instead of going with your own tunnel vision and what you think is best." This participant highlighted how being supported by individuals that have different backgrounds could create an environment for growth.

Pulling away from one's own tunnel vision reflected the power the learning community had on the participants' experiences. Participant One highlighted this when they were disappointed to have all their counseling slots full and would not have an opportunity to observe other counselors working. This individual stated: "I'm learning so much from watching them navigate this territory too." The contributions of the supervisors further provided an avenue to construct knowledge. Participant Two noted that it was the supervisor's "understanding and their ways of challenging us and encouraging us to think differently has facilitated that and not make us think differently but throwing a little tidbit in there." Working with many different people with varying backgrounds

created space to triangulate personal beliefs with the beliefs of others as they were hearing the stories of their clients, that too, had varied cultural backgrounds. Participant Three described this as: "rubbing up against a variety of individuals from a variety of experiences from a variety of countries and you know ability levels so, um, being able to really appreciate the kind of the differences that I may never have even noticed unless I would have talked to these people and kind of been in class with them and heard their perspective." Participant Three continued "observing my classmates working with people from different backgrounds. Honestly just being able to listen to people and the differences in which they tell their story. Some of it is thematically cultural and some of it is individual."

The learning community would not have been whole without the clients at the training clinic. A key element that clients provided was a genuine relationship with individuals that were different than themselves. Participant Five noted how working with clients in the clinic brought a much fuller understanding of the content learned in classes. Participant Four stated: "I think for me for every client that I've worked with directly or every client that I've observed I have been able to connect my life some way to that clients and that's helped me build empathy and I think that's the core for that's the key social justice or a social perspective." This connection to a personal element expanded outside the direct experiences in the practicum setting.

In addition to the people involved within the class, concurrent experiences contributed to the learning community. Each participant brought in narratives that impacted how they were learning and sharing with others in the practicum experience. These experiences ranged from Participant One's work with helping immigrants get documentation to get jobs in a nearby town, Participant Two's graduate assistantship that had her advocating for survivors of sexual assault, to Participant Five's working with her sports team and teaching her players about autonomy and

fairness and "what it means to be equals and respect each other." The outside experiences were integral to the participants' experiences. Combining these experiences with the conditions created by bringing together peers, supervisors, and clients created the space for change to occur.

Change Agents

Specific areas of change were disclosed by the participants and encompass one of the major themes within the phenomenon. The change agents included awareness, responsibility, comfort, and motivation. Each of these entities emerged through the phenomenon. Participants highlighted the awareness of social concerns, comfort that stemmed from the confidence gained through practice, a sense of personal responsibility towards social justice, and the motivation to act.

Awareness was brought to the forefront as participants were being exposed to counseling relationships. The participants consistently noted the importance of working with diverse clients. Participant Three stated: "I'm counseling a Chinese person and kind of understanding the cultural implications that this person is experiencing.....it's coming to life the racial identity model and just understanding the way that people grapple with their identity and the ways that kind of the system itself may play against them a little bit." There was a fusion of previous courses and the experiences unfolding for them in the practicum course. Participant Three continued: "I think that one of the things that multicultural classes and the training can do is prepare my ears and my observation skills to be like listening for these things and then when they start coming in, um I can, I can, be kind of, grasping them a little bit. Whereas somebody who hasn't necessarily been exposed to these things it would be just passing right under the bridge." Participant Two echoed this sentiment as she described listening to the radio one day. The individuals on the radio were making some biased remarks and Participant Two noted that something was different for her. She recognized that the words being spoken on the radio could be harmful to marginalized groups.

Although she realized that she has always been sensitive towards marginalized groups, she has attained a new level of awareness that sparked a different response. This different response was wanting to act upon this injustice that was being presented.

The responsibility that the participants were feeling came from within. Participant Two stated: "I know I need to do it so that's the responsibility because I think that's me as a person before the program kind of fostered and built up even more amplified even more when I started the program and now that I'm actually doing it it's just like I have to do it." Participant One recognized that there is some responsibility in action and stated that: "I can sit here and tell myself that the world is a certain way for a really long time but until I'm willing to just try the opposite it doesn't make that much of a difference. So, I challenge myself." Participant Four saw the role they played in advocacy and noted: "see myself obviously as an advocate both on the professional level and on a personal level and I also see myself as someone who has access or connection to all the resources that they might need in order for those that are marginalized to get the help that they might need." The participants identified this new awareness and skill set along with an internal drive to use what they had learned. Participant Five noted: "I guess you could say or really just kind of making sure that, you know, if I'm going to preach it I better be able to put it into action." Closely linked with the responsibility was a motivation to act.

Motivation was another agent identified throughout the practicum experience. In the focus group, participants talked about how the motivation or desire to act in a socially just way was not something new, but a theme that was important and carried over from previous life experiences and value sets. Participant Three reflected this sentiment in the reasons for wanting to become a counselor in the first place: "my reason for even entering into the counseling profession have been affirmed and I would like to be a high school counselor, a professional high school counselor

someday and the reason being that I see my role hopefully as a future school counselor as a cheerleader or an encourager to individuals as well as schools and systems and teachers and groups and families." Participant Two concluded that: "I think I've always had like, the desire and motivation to act and to want to advocate for social justice and fairness and equity. Um, but it was never that opportunity to do so in a very specific way." This speaks how the learning community heightened the motivational factor due to the synergy that was created by bringing the different entities together. Participant Three stated: "I think knowing myself and needing to account to myself especially because I'm receiving feedback I am, um, receiving supervision for the first time as professional understanding that I, I do have biases and I do have experiences." This statement brings together motivation and how change agents are occurring within the learning community.

With this increasing awareness of looking through new lenses of responsibility and motivation, the next change agent was comfort in taking action. Comfort was linked closely with the confidence one felt about seeing clients and how working with clients felt. Participant Five noted: "Working with clients, as a general piece, I think that you can have all these ideals and like, all these explanations of how you could go about something or in how this situation someone might need this, but I don't think you can really get a good understanding until you are in that moment with the client." Fear was evident in the participants' discussion surrounding comfort. Participant Three stated: "So before where there might have been fear with not necessarily working with clients with different backgrounds but fear about what I should be doing the thought is about well I can be myself with client but what might need to be a little bit different in order for me to work best with the client, you know?" Experience within the practicum provided opportunities for participants to interact with others and experience comfort. The change agents are intricately interwoven with the learning community and foster a movement towards action.

Readiness to Action

A general sense of readiness to action emerged across themes. Individuals used the learning community to inform their beliefs and refine how they made sense of past experiences. Bringing together past experiences and the learning community created the context for change agents to emerge. As awareness grew, opportunities for social action became more evident, responsibility and motivation were tested, and comfort levels toward action changed. Each participant had their own specific experiences of change agents based upon the various depth and breadth of experience and engagement in the learning community created during the practicum experience (see Figure 1).
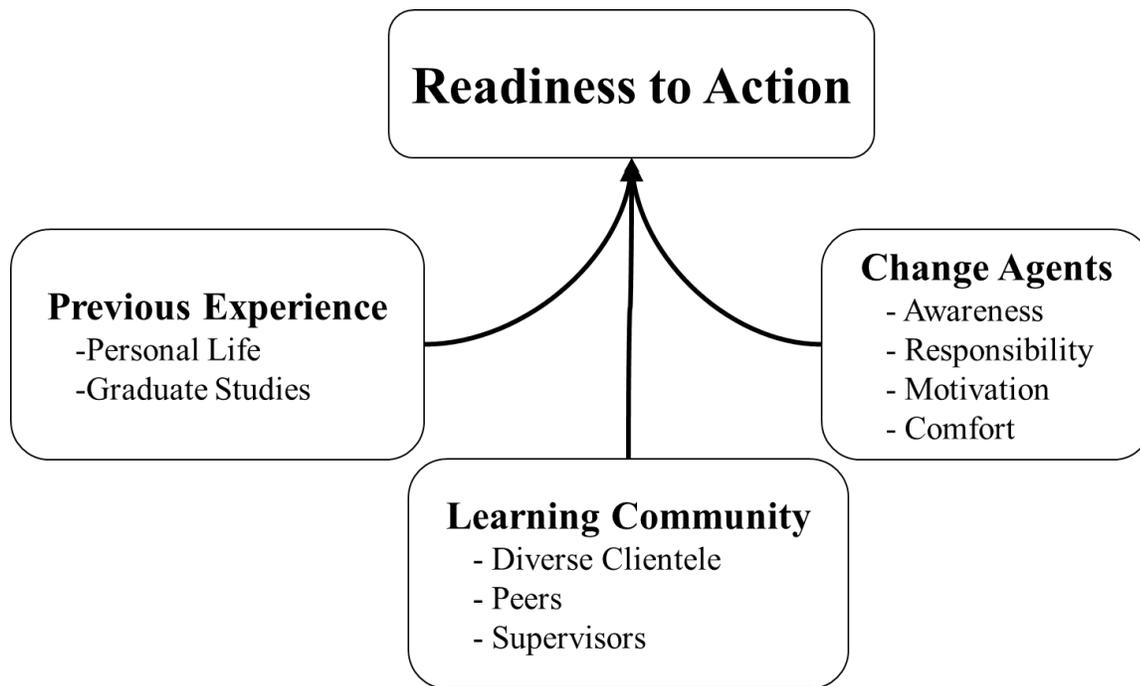

Figure 1. Key elements of experience.

Participant Two brought these elements together quite succinctly in the first round of interviews:

> I think by taking what I've learned in classes and just my beliefs overall and putting it into action with the clients that I have, it's showing me exactly what I need to be and want to be as a professional counselor. So it's promoting my role because it's making me do these

things. It's making me put my beliefs and values into action. It's making me interact with these people in ways that I've always wanted to but I just didn't have the skills yet or the confidence yet to put that into action if that makes sense. So by having clients that are different than me or interacting with people that have different backgrounds than me it's promoting my role in a sense that it's making me become more aware of others and making me, it's making me be fair and just.

The word "makes" was explored with Participant Two and highlighted the internal force as opposed to external forces for change. When this was brought up in the focus group, participants agreed with the concept of responsibility being an internal driving force. Again, Participant Two summed up her experience after reflecting upon the presentation of the themes: "I had the motivation to want to do it and I felt the responsibility before and during practicum but I didn't know how to put it into play, into practice, so that was something that was pretty big for me."

The practicum experience was an initial step in the practical application of the concepts they had been exposed to in the past and been taught in their graduate experience. Participant Five described this:

As a general piece, I think that you can have all these ideals and like, all these explanations of how you could go about something or in how this situation someone might need this, but I don't think you can really get a good understanding until you are in that moment with the client.

As participants experienced this new understanding, the practicum learning community was present to foster that development.

Discussion

The textural-structural description provides an initial framework into experiential factors present during the first practicum and furthers the discussion on how counseling students develop a state of readiness for social justice action. Participants pointed to various change agents, past experiences, and elements of a learning community that facilitated their readiness towards social justice action. These findings were consistent with themes that have emerged with developmental models (Rønnestad et al., 2019; McNeill & Stoltenberg, 2016). Change agents including an awareness of the need for social justice, feeling responsible for acting in a social justice minded way, increasing comfort associated with melding theoretical ideas with clinical practice, and being motivated to act were key factors in participants' development of a social justice mindset. These themes are similar to the overriding structures (i.e., autonomy, self and other awareness, motivation) of the Integrated Developmental Model (IDM) to understand supervisee development (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 2016). According to IDM, autonomy, self and other awareness, and motivation of supervisees change to allow movement to a more advanced stage.

Participants communicated motivation as a very important factor in experiencing their readiness for social justice action. Many participants pointed to personal experiences and personal values as contributing factors to their level of motivation. This finding is consistent with Caldwell and Vera's (2010) study of counseling psychology students. More specifically, the authors found that the influences of parents, family members, and personal experiences of injustice assisted in the development of a social justice orientation (Caldwell & Vera, 2010). In the current study, participants pointed to personal adversity (i.e., death of a loved one, membership in non-majority group), family values (i.e., relatives who are strong social justice advocates), and other experiences (i.e., volunteering with underserved populations). These types of experiences were important in

developing a social justice perspective. Perhaps these experiences amongst the learning environment raised participant awareness of the need for social justice and therefore, contributed to their motivation to act in their professional role.

A critical element within the textural-structural description is the learning community where the change agents were observed. McAuliffe and Eriksen (2011) provided ten guidelines in the understanding of constructivist-developmental teaching. The current research supported these guidelines particularly with: (a) valuing and promoting experience, (b) emphasizing multiple perspectives, (c) recognizing that conflict and dialectics are the norm, and (d) questioning categorical thinking. The predominant features of the learning environment included the counseling sessions with the clients and supervision with their supervisors and peers. Interacting with clients who were different from themselves was important for all participants in their movement towards social justice action. In fact, client interactions seemed to be the largest part of the learning community for participants. Many participants stated that client interactions, especially those with clients different from themselves, allowed participants to practice skills and develop knowledge presented in the classroom. Client interactions seemed to promote reflection, including comparing past experiences with current experiences, which seemed to influence factors such as motivation for, awareness of, and responsibility for social justice action. This finding is consistent with previous literature on the important of clinical education in the training of professional counselors (Caldwell & Vera, 2010, Goodman et al., 2018).

Clinical supervisors were also identified by participants as part of the learning community. Interventions providing an opportunity for personal reflection seemed to be important to participant experiencing readiness for social justice action. Reflection has been identified in previous literature as important for developing social justice competence (Dollarhide et al., 2021).

Reflective interventions took place in the form of journal entries, intentional questioning during individual supervision, and during group supervision. A key factor was allowing participants to triangulate information and beliefs about fairness and equity. Participants were able to reflect upon their beliefs, check them against their new relationships with a diverse clientele, and then compare with their supervisors and peers.

Implications

Findings from the current study provide a framework for educators, university supervisors, and field supervisors to optimize the learning environment where active involvement in social justice is in its infancy. Implications and potential actions for educators of counselors include: (a) providing opportunities for supervisees to interact with traditionally underserved populations, (b) creating a learning community where support and triangulation of multicultural ideas are possible (c) bringing in past experiences related to social fairness and equity into the supervision process, and (d) addressing the key change agents of awareness, responsibility, motivation, and comfort for each supervisee.

Interacting with clients who are different from themselves was reported by participants as an important factor in their experience. Programs should provide students opportunities to interact with diverse and traditionally underserved populations. For counseling programs with on-campus training clinics, it is important to "cast a wide net" when recruiting clients. Lauka and McCarthy (2013) have noted that training clinics may be ideally poised to promote social justice through the low-cost or free services typically provided. Consequently, a coordinated referral system should be in place with local community agencies and university programs that target such clientele. For programs without on-campus training clinics relying on community agencies as practicum sites, efforts should be made to develop affiliation agreements with agencies that provide students with

opportunities to work with traditionally underserved populations. Additional considerations may include incorporating service-learning experiences prior to, or concurrent with practicum training. For example, Farrell et al., (2020) offered two models of service learning conducive to the aims of advocacy training in CACREP accredited counseling programs: discipline-based and problem-based service learning. Both models require students to collaborate with the local community to identify institutional and social barriers that impede client wellbeing, drawing on advocacy principles learned in class.

The intersection of diverse counseling experiences with peer and supervisor feedback in a supportive environment was found to be a key factor. Educators should carefully consider the components included in their training environment. While students should receive ample opportunities to work with diverse clientele, equally important is the time allocated for reflection, feedback, and peer observation. Underlining these experiences should be a climate of support, openness, and collaboration that supervisors intentionally establish and monitor. Recognizing that the training environment is not a closed system, university and field supervisors should be aware of concurrent student experiences that may shape their understanding of social justice. For programs without an on-campus training clinic, these factors should be considered when establishing external field placements. Clarity should be given on training requirements and expectations of field supervisors, while providing ongoing support and professional development for both students and field supervisors.

The supervision process contained within the learning community served a crucial role for students. Clinical supervisors should provide an open invitation for students to explore past experiences related to social fairness and equity. Considering an array of interventions, supervisors guide students through greater understanding of how personal experiences inform attitudes,

beliefs, and values toward social justice. Interventions aimed at promoting self-reflection may be of value, examples include the use of reflective questioning during supervision (Dollarhide et al., 2021), assigning journal entries reflecting on social justice ideas such as personal responsibility for action, evaluation of sessions for social justice topics, and personal attitudes toward social justice ideas for individual clients.

Participants reported the presence of four change agents: awareness, responsibility, motivation, and comfort with social justice. Educators may find it beneficial to assess for these change agents in their students prior to practicum. Open dialogue about past experiences may provide a baseline through which supervisors may tailor their students' training plan and employ effective interventions that facilitate development of a social justice mindset. For example, students with a lower awareness of social inequities may benefit from educational literature or media resources. Similarly, Caldwell and Vera (2010) recommend that students be assessed for a social justice orientation upon admission into their academic program. While outside of the scope of this study, the inclusion of change agents at various milestones throughout the program of a student is worth consideration.

Limitations

Results of the current study should be interpreted with limitations of the research. Although results can be transferable to other settings, the current study is limited to the specific context described. Even though generalizability and replicability were not the goal of this project, participants were recruited from one program. The characteristics of the counseling program in which the study took place may have impacted factors related to participant experiences in developing a social justice perspective. Although precautions were taken to minimize the researcher impact on participants (i.e., no current student-professor interview dyads), researchers

may have impacted participant responses. To decrease selection bias, the opportunity to participate in this research study was equally provided to all practicum students. However, the results could be different if different students participated. Further, given the researchers' positions at the university, its reasonable that participants may have responded in socially desirable ways and that could have impacted the results.

Future research

Continued research studies are essential to understand the development of a social justice mindset for counselors and specific teaching and supervision techniques that will foster an environment of change. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies could be followed to further expand the current research study. From a qualitative perspective, methods of the current study could be repeated with a larger sample size to identify differences and similarities in results or could be utilized in a longitudinal study where participant perspectives were identified at various points before, during, and after graduate training. These studies could further explore the experiences of students or develop a grounded theory that could propose a developmental process for integrating a social justice identity where action is a key element.

Quantitative studies could be developed using the findings from this study to survey students and educators around the core themes identified. Focusing on counseling supervision, future studies could investigate the impact of clinical supervision on the development of a social justice mindset. Practicum students could be surveyed to identify the supervision practices that directly fostered social justice learning (e.g., intentional discussion about fairness and equity during group supervision, reflective journal activities, intentional questioning during individual supervision). Supervisors could be surveyed regarding the barriers they perceive to providing supervision interventions that could advance student social justice knowledge and skills (e.g.,

identify with a majority group, do not feel confident with their own racial/cultural identity development, etc.). Pretest, posttest, and control group designs could be useful to determine which clinical supervision interventions had a significant impact on the student's development of a social justice perspective. Empirical evidence to guide supervision practices is critical for ensuring counseling students develop the necessary knowledge and skills for social justice-oriented counseling.

Conclusions

Practicum experiences provide students an opportunity to begin working with diverse clients under extensive supervision. Supervisors can optimize the experience where counselors-in-training can begin to put social justice concepts into practice. Participants in this study identified an open learning environment with opportunities to explore past experiences and understand one's awareness, responsibility, motivation, and comfort in providing socially-just counseling provided the atmosphere to move toward action. As this is a counseling imperative, counselor educators and supervisors must continue to work in creating experiences for students that promote social justice action.

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