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## A Qualitative Exploration of Counseling Interns' Experiences and Perceptions of Moonlight

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## A Qualitative Exploration of Counseling Interns' Experiences and Perceptions of *Moonlight*

### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the findings produced from a basic qualitative study designed to explore the experiences and perceptions of mental health counseling interns exposed to the popular film, *Moonlight*. Data collection included a focus group interview, completed written reflections, and member checking activities. Implications for counselor education, suggestions for integrating *Moonlight* into curriculum, limitations, and directions for future research are examined.

### Keywords

film-based pedagogy, intersectionality, experiential learning

Pedagogical approaches to developing multicultural sensitivity and competency in counselor education has been, and continues to be, an area of interest for the profession (Malott, 2010; Priester et al., 2008; Seward, 2014). There is much consensus in the counselor education literature to support the use of experiential learning theory as an effective means of promoting counselor self-awareness in relation to cultural identity and experience (Kim & Lyons, 2003; Pieterse, 2009). In Priester et al.'s (2008) analysis of instructional strategies, they discovered that experiential activities, such as reaction papers to a work of art, a book, or a film (p. 35) were among the most utilized didactic interventions in multicultural counseling courses. Film is no longer a novel pedagogical device in the field of counselor education; however, the concepts and theories illuminated in multicultural counselor education are very much dependent upon the content of the films selected for viewing. Despite the recognition of popular film as a beneficial media to facilitate cultural learning in counselor education (Greene et al., 2014; Pierce & Wooloff, 2012; Shen, 2015; Villalba & Redmond, 2008), there exists a gap in the literature. Little has been published in counselor education research regarding the effects of utilizing popular film to illuminate the intersection of identities, privilege, and marginalization (Nitolli & Guifrida, 2017). Also, no current literature focuses on the experiences of advanced CITs (i.e., in clinical experiences courses) intentionally exposed to intersectional films.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies**

The complexity of identities interacting with their environments are at the crux of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) (Ratts et al., 2016). The MSJCC provide a conceptual framework for implementing multicultural and social justice competencies into counseling theories, practices, and research (Ratts et al., 2016). The MSJCC

emphasize the intersections of identities and how the interplay of power, privilege, and oppression influence the counseling relationship (Ratts et al., 2016). The language and directives of the MSJCC illuminate the reality that pluralistic identities exist in all individuals (both counselors and clients) and that the human experience of intersecting identities is socially influenced by power, oppression, privilege, and marginalization. Additionally, the MSJCC emphasize the importance of CITs acquiring cultural knowledge, self-awareness, skills, and actions in order to ethically counsel diverse client populations (Ratts et al., 2016). Film-based activities have been effectively utilized to assist CITs in gaining knowledge about certain categorical cultural and social populations (Frick et al., 2017; Shen, 2015) and have been found to have a positive impact on trainees' development of multicultural counseling competency and multicultural counseling self-efficacy (Greene et al., 2014).

### **Intersectionality Theory**

Perhaps the most noteworthy is the direct connection that the MSJCC have to intersectionality theory and the subsequent need for counselor educators to employ dynamic learning activities that assist CITs in recognizing the intersectional experiences and needs of their clients. Intersectionality theory has its origins in social justice and human rights movements and is characterized by its motivation to combat marginalization and oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Historically, intersectionality theory manifested from the works of Crenshaw (1989). Although intersectionality espouses multiple perspectives, perhaps its most foundational intentions are to 1) challenge the notion that cultural identity can be reduced to one set of values associated to one identity; 2) address the impact of multiple cultural identities; and 3) address social inequalities that are perpetuated by institutional oppression (Walby et al., 2012). The guiding principles of intersectionality theory have also been noted for their applicable influence on the

counseling relationship and conceptualization of cultural and social identities of the counselor and client (Ratts et al., 2016). Extant literature demonstrates the effective use of film to teach CITs about racism and antiracism (Pieterse, 2009) and identity development (Pierce & Wooloff, 2012), promote exploration and awareness of racial attitudes (Soble et al., 2011), and examine the interactions of culturally diverse individuals (Villalba & Redmond, 2008). Nittoli and Guiffrida (2017) found that film-based activities were successful in bringing to life the multicultural course concepts and stimulating difficult, but necessary, conversations about race, ethnicity, privilege, and power in counselor education.

### **Experiential Pedagogy**

Experiential learning is considered “best practice” in counselor education (ACES, 2016) and counselor educators have access to a wide range of teaching strategies which exemplify Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) such as case studies, role plays, fishbowl exercises, films, and fieldwork. ELT is an approach to learning that is grounded in the works of Dewey, Piaget, and Lewin (Kolb, 1984). Reduced to its core, experiential learning is focused on “learning through reflection on doing” (Felicia, 2011, p. 1,003). ELT posits that experience serves as a key role in creating knowledge (Bergsteiner et al., 2010) and rejects the notion of students playing a passive role in the education experience. Kolb (1984) characterized experiential learning as a four-stage model comprised of progressive elements aimed at facilitating a transformation of experience. In sequence, the elements are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Within the concrete experience stage of Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, educators engage learners with a concrete experience that serves as the basis for reflection. In stage two, the goal is for the learner to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives, while stage three is focused on the learner’s ability to “create concepts that

integrate their observations into logically sound theories” (Kolb, 1984, p. 30). Kolb and Kolb (2009) stated that, within the active experimentation stage, the derived implications of abstract conceptualization can be “actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences” (p. 299).

ELT is a valuable pedagogical model that may be used by educators to affirm the role that experience has in the learning process. This emphasis on experiential learning as a “best practice” in counselor education (ACES, 2016) is elucidated by its practical use with CITs and validates it as a method worthy of inquiry in this study. Among the most utilized experiential activities by counselor educators in multicultural courses, and the most relevant one to this study, is film. Popular films, which constitute an applicable concrete experience (Pugh, 2014), have great potential for stimulating the affective processes of learning (Elliott & Sommer, 2017) and facilitating counselors toward aspirational multicultural competence (Greene et al., 2014; Shen, 2015).

Although previous studies have demonstrated the efficacious impact of popular film on the development of multicultural and social justice counseling competencies in CITs, all of these studies were conducted in didactic multicultural and/or sexuality counseling courses (Frick et al., 2017; Greene et al., 2014; Nittoli & Guiffrida, 2017; Shen, 2015; Villalba & Redmond, 2008). This study varies from previous studies, as its goal is to understand clinical mental health counseling interns’ experiences and perceptions of *Moonlight*, as well as their perspectives on the film’s pedagogical value.

### **Moonlight**

The recent study conducted by Nittoli and Guiffrida (2017) is representative of the progressive direction of multicultural counselor education. Nittoli and Guiffrida’s (2017) efforts to use film as a broaching mechanism to issues of power and privilege emphasize the significance

of intersectional and critical education – an integral modification that counselor educators must become comfortable with deploying in their classrooms if they are to truly encourage CITs to conceptualize and attend to the intersectional identities of future clients (Chan et al., 2018). In this vein, the presented study contributes to the literature regarding the explicit and purposeful use of film that illuminates the subjective experiences of individuals comprised of intersecting identities. The film that was critically examined and selected as a concrete experience in this study was *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016).

*Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) is a coming-of-age drama film written and directed by Barry Jenkins, based on Tarell Alvin McCraney's unpublished semi-autobiographical play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. The film has received accolades from critics and audiences. In 2017, the film was awarded a Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture-Drama and Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay. Additionally, the film has been the focus of some peer-reviewed scholarship (Copeland, 2018; Kannan et al., 2017; Shannon, 2020). In terms of pedagogical potential, Copeland (2018) stated, "In contemporary educational settings, *Moonlight* provides an intense exploration of Black masculinity in the context of the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (p. 689). Kannan et al. (2017) offered a similar appraisal of the film with their commentary, "With complexity, the film trades in and tests racial stereotypes and understandings of black families; relishes in the heterogeneity of black and Latinx identities; displays cultural contradictions at the heart of racism, heteronormativity, and hegemonic masculinity..." (p. 287). This study complements Shannon's (2020) case for using *Moonlight* to teach intersectionality theory in counselor education, by understanding and amplifying counseling interns' experiences and perceptions of the film and its pedagogic potential.

The film focuses on the protagonist, Chiron, who faces oppression across developmental life stages. Specifically, the film illuminates Chiron's experiences as a QPOC living in poverty with his drug-affected mother. The film is comprised of three chapters each titled after the protagonist's nickname or identity assigned at specific temporal and developmental periods. In chapter one, "Little," the viewer is introduced to a young Chiron as he struggles to understand the categorical identity descriptions forced upon him by individuals in his environment. Although Chiron hungers for self-awareness, societal and community expectations of masculinity make this a complicated task. In chapter two, "Chiron," the viewer is shown Chiron's experiences with bullying, his mother's dependence on him for monetary support, and his first same-sex intimate moment (with Kevin) and subsequent perceived rejection. In this chapter, the viewer is also exposed to the resultant affective consequences of these experiences. In the final chapter, "Black," the viewer bears witness to Chiron's created adult identity and his fragility as he is reunited with Kevin and honestly reflects upon the suppression of his sexual identity. The content and process of *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) collaborate in tandem to absorb the viewer into the lived experiences of Chiron, and in doing so provide an emic perspective of his intersecting identities in transaction with various environments. This absorption may promote the viewer to conceptualize Chiron's realities across time and reflect upon their own identities in relation to Chiron's.

### **Methodology**

The author's research lens is influenced by several factors, including their own subjective intersectional identity (white, cisgender, queer male), philosophical assumptions about reality and knowledge, constructionist research values, and aspirational multicultural and social justice counseling competencies. The author's epistemological philosophy is best characterized by the notion that human experiences serve as the impetuous process for knowledge construction, and



that these experiences are inevitably influenced by one's subjective perceptions. The author's convictions surrounding research align with a postmodernist approach; specifically, the author's preferred research paradigm is social constructivism, as they hold the belief that knowledge is co-constructed between researchers and participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). A basic qualitative research design, which Merriam (2009) describes as being philosophically deduced from constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism, is warranted when researchers are interested in "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23).

The primary research question that guided this study was "What are the experiences and perceptions of counseling interns exposed to the film *Moonlight* in a multicultural context?" The goal was to understand how counseling interns interpret and make meaning of their experiences and perceptions of *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016). Although the sample was location-bound, the aim of this study was not to gain an in-depth understanding of a group of individuals over a period of time (case study) or to specifically understand the role of culture (ethnography). Nor was the goal to develop a theory (grounded theory) or to explicitly understand the essence of shared phenomenological experiences. Rather the focus of this study, which was to gain intentional insight about the intrapersonal experiences of CITs as they participated in the experiential activity of watching *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) in order to assist counselor educators to better conceptualize how the film may be used as a pedagogical device, warranted the use of a basic qualitative study design.

### **Researcher's Role**

As the primary researcher of this study, the author served in several crucial roles, including research instrument (Merriam, 2009; Xu & Storr, 2012), participant recruiter, focus group

facilitator, transcriptionist, data analyzer, and knowledge co-constructor. The author's enmeshment with the research process was one that was undeniable and warranted routine reflexivity. Numerous strategies, which are detailed in the Trustworthiness and Credibility section, were implemented throughout the research process to ensure that the author worked to cultivate awareness of their assumptions, biases, and perceived notions, in order to reduce the possibility of overly influencing study findings and the overall process of conducting the research.

### **Recruitment and Sample**

Once approval from the university IRB was obtained, a purposeful sample of master's level students from a CACREP accredited program at a regional institution located in the southeastern portion of the United States was recruited. The researcher met with students enrolled in CMHC internship courses and served as a guest lecturer to present an informational session on the MSJCC and an overview of intersectionality theory. A brief description of *Moonlight* was included on the informed consent; however, the author did not provide any direct insight or opinion on how the film might illuminate concepts related to the MJSCC or intersectionality theory. The research study (which was conducted on a later date) was described, informed consent was reviewed, and students' questions were fielded.

The sample consisted of 12 participants ( $N = 12$ ) who had already completed a course in multicultural counseling, were enrolled in a clinical course, and were willing and able to express their experiences and perceptions of the film *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016). In regard to demographics, all participants identified as female and were enrolled in the clinical mental health counseling internship course at the time of data collection. Participants were either in their first ( $n = 2$ ), second ( $n = 8$ ), or third ( $n = 2$ ) semester of internship. Participants ranged between 24 and 44 years of age. In terms of ethnicity, the sample was heterogeneous with participants identifying as

either White ( $n = 10$ ), Black ( $n = 1$ ), or unidentified ( $n = 1$ ). In terms of affectional orientation, participants identified as straight, ( $n = 9$ ), lesbian ( $n = 2$ ), or bisexual ( $n = 1$ ). Only one participant had viewed *Moonlight* prior to the study.

### **Study Design**

The study was intentionally designed in such a way that the use of three methods to collect data in order to effectively triangulate, including a focus group interview, written reflection forms, and member checking activities that elicited additional participant data. On the day of the study (which occurred apart from the internship course), once written informed consent had been obtained and demographic information was collected, the participants immediately watched *Moonlight* together as a group. Participants were directed to refrain from discussing their reactions until after the film ended. The author, who observed participants during the film, also refrained from making any comments or emotional reactions to the film as to not influence participants' perceptions and experiences. Following the film viewing, a 90-minute video and audio recorded focus group interview was conducted in order to facilitate the reflection and sharing of their experiences and perceptions of the film. The interview protocol contained six questions: 1) "How would you describe your experience during the film?"; 2) "What do you believe informs your experience of the film?"; 3) "How do you perceive Chiron's experiences in the film?"; 4) "Please describe any changes in feeling or emotion that you experienced during the film."; 5) "How do you perceive the film in relation to your role as an intern?"; and 6) "How do you perceive the use of this film in counselor education?"

Following the focus group, each participant completed a written reflection form that provided an opportunity to personally reflect upon their experiences in relation to the film's protagonist. The questions outlined on the written reflection form were as follows: 1) "How do

you perceive your personal experiences are like Chiron's, based on your intersecting identities?"; 2) "How do you perceive your personal experiences are different from Chiron's, based on your intersecting identities?"; and 3) "How has your experience in this study affected you?" The last data collection point was the member checking process, where participants were able to review, revise, and expand upon their responses in the transcribed focus group interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis (TA) is a method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning, or themes, within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Unlike other qualitative analysis traditions, TA is a flexible method (as opposed to a methodology) that can be applied across a range of theoretical frameworks and research paradigms (Clarke & Braun, 2017). TA is an iterative and reflective process that entails six phases: familiarity with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to become familiar with the data, the author reviewed the recorded focus group interview and written reflection forms numerous times before manually transcribing the interview verbatim. Next, the author worked on combing through the data to generate initial codes. Coding occurred at two levels: open coding and analytical coding. During open coding, the author identified and notated any segment of data that they thought might be useful (Merriam, 2009) from both data sets (focus group transcript and written reflections). For the second round of coding, the author engaged in analytical coding - which is a process of "coding that comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning" (Richards, 2005, p. 94). During analytical coding, the author reviewed and re-reviewed the open codes to identify and group them based on reflected similarity and interpreted connectedness, resulting in two lists of analytical codes which were then merged into one comprehensive list of codes derived from both sets of data.

This comprehensive list constituted “a primitive outline or classification system reflecting the recurring regularities or patterns” (Merriam, 2009, p. 180) in the data. These patterns became the categories by which data were sorted during the initial theme construction phase. Once the initial tentative themes were derived, the author worked to sort all of the schematic evidence into their respective themes. Further review of the data sets was conducted in order to re-review the context of participant quotes in relation to tentative themes until the data was saturated. In the process of defining and naming themes, the author worked to satisfy five important standards outlined by Merriam (2009) which resulted in themes that were “responsive to the purpose of the research,” “exhaustive,” “mutually exclusive,” “sensitizing,” and “conceptually congruent” (Merriam, 2009, pp. 185-186). Emergent themes were then made available to participants for member-checking; feedback from this process resulted in the collapse of an entire theme and confirmed agreement concerning the remaining five themes.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

A number of strategies were integrated into the research design in an effort to improve trustworthiness of the study and to reduce the impact of researcher bias and influence. The author did not serve as the instructor for the internship class from which participants were recruited; nor did the author have any prior relationships with participants before providing the 30-minute guest lecture on the MSJCC and intersectionality theory (recruitment effort). Other strategies included peer debriefing meetings with the author’s dissertation chair to overtly process their relationship with the data and consider other perspectives. Memos were maintained to reiterate the timeline of the study events and establish transparency. Reflexivity was practiced through the use of a reflexive journal to detail thoughts, feelings, and impressions regarding the research process, its

obstacles, and data analysis. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, member checks were conducted to ensure that the themes accurately reflected the group's experiences.

## **Results**

Following thorough examination of the data and confirmation with the participants via individual member checks, five major themes emerged: (a) emotional turbulence; (b) subjective levels of exposure to and identification with aspects of diversity; (c) emotional management; (d) empathy and understanding of clients' diverse experiences; and (e) counselor self-awareness. Pseudonyms are used to maintain participants' privacy.

### **Emotional Turbulence**

For most participants, experiencing numerous types of feelings throughout the film was commonplace. Some participants identified experiencing feelings and reactions that were similar in context, while others described experiencing feelings and reactions that were characterized by polarity. Some participants utilized verbiage that indicated elevated intensity of emotions and reactions at distinct moments during the film. A few participants reported feelings of confusion related to the plot of the film. The consensus was that *Moonlight* is a film that promotes a dynamic, rather than a static, and emotive journey for its viewers.

Participants reported numerous emotions throughout the film and indicated that these reactions varied greatly in terms of intensity. Some participants described their experiences of the film using language that reflected distress, specifically in the context of being surprised by the twists and turns of Chiron's story. For example, Giselle advised that "it like broke me when his mom called him out," referencing a remark Chiron's mother made to her drug dealer, and Chiron's mentor, Juan, regarding the way Chiron walked. Similarly, Jessica lamented the absence of Chiron's mother, stating "... but it just got all over me. That he didn't have nobody to give him a

proper bath for God's sakes." GT echoed Jessica's concern when she stated, "Yeah I thought he must have felt really unloved, you know. I mean that's just heart-breaking, but I almost thought he probably doesn't know what it is, you know, to be loved." Mike advised, "I was just going to say that it was, uh, it, it was sad. I did not cry, but I did want to cry so I held it back, but if I was at home I probably would have."

Some of the participants' emotional reactions were expressed with more forceful language and physical reactivity than others, which illuminated a subjective experience of emotional intensity for some. When asked to discuss their overall reactions to the film, Hazel reported that there were moments where she could feel herself getting "pissed off." She went on to say: "And for me, I had like a body response throughout. I was sitting here, I was like really tense . . . yeah, I was like crossing my arms." Mike demonstrated an intense emotional reaction as well when she became tearful and was unable to finish sharing her experience of the film to the group. Jessica normalized Mike's reaction by stating "the first time I watched it, I did cry." Violet, the only participant who did not speak during the focus group interview, wrote the following in her written reflection: "Honestly, I am extremely emotional. I literally didn't want to speak for fear of crying."

Throughout the focus group interview, there were numerous instances where participants explicitly advised that they were confused about *Moonlight's* plot. For example, when HM and Giselle were discussing a portion of the film where Chiron appears to be disappointed in Juan for selling drugs to his mother, Claire interjected, "Do we know what happened to that guy?" Mike then advised, "He died, but it didn't like really show how." Following Mike's comment, Jessica questioned whether Juan was actually Chiron's biological father. Jessica questioned:

Wait, that's his dad. Like didn't the mom state that? Like in an indirect way when they were in front of the car and he was telling her that . . . yeah when they were like arguing with each other in front of the car the mom stated are you gonna raise

him? You tell him why he walks like that. I just thought like maybe actually he was like his dad. You know?

Giselle provided her perspective on Jessica's question, stating:

I thought she was doing that because he was confiding in him so much and leaving home and staying with him. Like she probably thought like 'oh you can raise him better than I can.' He's coming to you rather than me. So that's what I got from it.

Participants made additional comments during the member-checking phase that reinforced this theme. Hazel responded to this theme by stating, "I agree with this because I went through a lot of emotions while watching this movie such as sadness, anger, fear, and happiness." Liz noted, "I definitely felt like I was on an emotional roller coaster during the film and felt so connected to the experiences and emotions of the main character." As evidenced by participants' quotes, *Moonlight* elicited mixed emotional reactions, in varying degrees of intensity, including most prominently dismay and confusion.

### **Subjective Levels of Exposure to and Identification with Aspects of Diversity**

As detailed in the methodology section, the focus group protocol included an item to elicit participants' reflections on what they believed informed their experiences and perceptions of *Moonlight*. Participants' responses to this question, and throughout the focus group interview, suggested that their experiences and perceptions of the film were informed by the level of exposure to aspects of diversity, subjective degrees of identification with aspects of diversity illustrated in *Moonlight*, and personal accounts about how participants have been vicariously exposed to diverse cultures and identities that differ from their own.

Most of the participants were very willing to disclose that their lack of or limited exposure to other populations informed their reactions to and experiences with the film. For example, HM stated the following at the onset of the focus group interview:



I was just like fascinated with it, because this is not a life, you know, that I have like ever, you know, been exposed to. Yeah, I mean, completely different lifestyle and then it was just like this curiosity, like oh my gosh what is going to happen to this kid? How is he going to turn out growing up in this circumstance? And I don't think that I pictured it; it was different than I pictured it ending, for sure.

When discussing her efforts to relate to Chiron, LR mentioned her limited exposure to diversity in this comment: “but by no means did I grow up in that kind of environment and the diversity in my hometown was like .001.” Similarly, GT wrote, “I am very unfamiliar with that culture he was raised in. I am unfamiliar with inner city life and being African-American.”

Although nearly all of the participants in this study were unable to personally identify with Chiron's experiences as a POC, some participants evaluated their own personal experiences and discovered entry points for relation to aspects of Chiron's identities. For two participants, their affectional orientation presented a significant point of connection with Chiron's struggles. In the focus group interview, KJ shared:

I think I mostly related to the LGBT part of the film. And when he was getting picked on. I think when you don't have a lot of, like, if you don't accept it yourself yet. Words hurt a lot more than what people say later on when you're very self-aware and don't really care. Uh, so I think I saw that a little bit when he was getting picked on.

KJ's adds to this point of connection in her written reflection, stating, “I, like Chiron, am gay. I think that his confusion on what he feels is similar to my own when he was young. Although not picked on by my peers, I know how hurtful it can be when your family member says something derogatory.” Violet also expressed her identification with Chiron's sexual identity experiences. In her written reflection post, she articulated:

I think when Chiron experienced his first sexual experience with a man it really touched me – I, being homosexual, had a similar first sexual experience and then found myself mocked for enjoying it. I also found that being gay and from a poor SES really resonated with me. My family basically disowned me and I was told that I was a sinner which I found similar to when Chiron was called a faggot.

Numerous participants advised that their experiences or perceptions had been informed through vicarious exposure to situations or experiences endured by Chiron – primarily from the clients whom they serve as interns. For example, Claire stated,

I did not grow up with a similar experience, but I work with a lot of the population who had similar childhoods. I work with families who had their kids removed so you can kind of see that generational situation with like the drugs and abuse and all that kind of thing. So that's been primarily my experience with it, so that kind of informed me as I watched.

Claire's comment resonated with GT, who shared:

I think what shaped my viewpoint, like a lot, was that I think about the kids that I work with and so I was kind of thinking of my clients and their issues kind of thing. Like this is probably how my client feels when they go home. It may not be the exact same situation but it's very similar with the drugs and everything. So, I just felt really bad for him when I was thinking about my clients.

As evidenced by findings, some viewers had more or less personal exposure to diverse populations, but most all of the participants were able to reflect on their own lived experiences and the lived experiences of their clients in relation to the film.

### **Emotional Management**

This theme emerged because of the participants' consistent comments about the lived and potential experiences of hearing clients' stories and their concerns regarding their reactions. The participants' affective reactions to *Moonlight* appeared to prompt memories of clients' stories that had also impacted participants emotionally. The participants' exchanges contained an emphasis on management of emotions to not inadvertently negate clients' experiences or opportunities to share their stories.

The data highlighted numerous instances of *Moonlight* evoking memories of clients and their stories. Recalling memories of clients' stories was difficult for some participants and resulted in emotional responses. For example, Mike noted:

But earlier when I got emotional, um, there was a kiddo that reminded me just like this kid. His mom was a, uh did crack and his mom would come and visit him and the whole reason he started trapping was to fuel his mom's addiction. And she was actually the one who set him up with the drug dealer to get him going when he was 12 years old. And like now he's in the pen for 30 years for what he's done, but he was like a scrawny kid. He was tiny, tiny like that kid, just like that kid, like everything about him.

Similarly, Giselle recounted:

And like in that moment watching that, and you're like talking about taking a bath and doing everything by himself; I have a client, she's 12, and she told me about how she would have to get up for school in second grade by herself and take a bath, shower, and walk to a neighbor's house to get her hair dried and go to school. Cause her mom wasn't there and stuff just like that. And I had an emotional feeling to that because I thought about my client and how alone she was and had to make her own food and stuff in second grade.

In conjunction with hearing participants' stories of clients, some participants concluded that hearing distressing narratives would be a common occurrence in the counseling field. The group's internalization of this reality prompted further exploration of the implications. Jessica suggested that the more authentic and genuine aspect of her identity is capable of reducing her "to a puddle of tears" when exposed to distressing client stories, and that for this reason she must work to compartmentalize that aspect of herself and maintain a more professional manner. In response to Jessica's examination, GT responded, "That's true. I feel like we are really emotional, like, caring people but then when you're put in this situation in order to help the people you have to be hard. (laughs) I'm sorry, strong, strong." GT's comments appeared to have resonated with Jessica, as she responded, "Yeah, you can't be just like in tears. You have to be like emotionally strong." As these descriptions suggest, *Moonlight* has the potential to elicit counseling interns' reactions to clients who have similar backgrounds as Chiron and to prompt exploration about their ability to manage personal emotions in counseling sessions.

## **Empathy and Understanding of Clients' Diverse Experiences**

The emergence of this theme was informed by participants' comments that reflected increased understanding of others' experiences. Some comments made by the participants presented perceptions regarding the experiences of clients who may be exposed to situations that may be considered typical in the helping profession (i.e., substance use), while other comments made by participants presented perceptions regarding the complexity of navigating intersections of identities and experiences.

*Moonlight* prompted participants to think about an array of issues that may impact individuals in our society. Specifically, *Moonlight* stimulated conversations aimed at understanding characters' motives to behave in certain ways. One topic that was brought up by Mike, in response to a scene in the film, centered around the perception that younger clients may have to engage in illicit activities to support themselves and their families. Mike noted:

Like we can preach and try to teach like you know new thoughts to our clients, but the reality is if you're the sole provider, you're 13, what job are you going to get? You can get one on the street. They don't care how old you are and you're gonna make money. And you're gonna be glorified.

Later in the interview, during an exchange with Jessica, Giselle commented on Paula's (Chiron's mother) drug use. Giselle stated, "But the mom was also on drugs, is the thing. Her inhibitions and motherly instincts are gone. Or fogged. She obviously didn't have money for herself to do anything for herself because she was asking her child for money." Giselle's comment suggested an attempt to understand why Paula was acting the way she did.

Some participants made comments regarding Chiron's intersectional identities and experiences. Claire expressed, "He like overcame so much adversity like, you know, race, bullying, sexuality, like drugs, socioeconomic. Pretty much everything that you can throw at a person that you have to overcome." Giselle also commented on Chiron's hardship, stating:

I feel like he had a lot of things going on and he really didn't know how to like process one thing at a time because it was multiple things at once . . .and I just felt like there were so many different layers to him that he probably couldn't even figure out what was going on.

A bit later in the interview, Jessica redirected the conversation back to the topic of Chiron's sexual orientation but does so within the context of race and gender. Jessica shared:

It's also really hard like in African American households, like just being like homosexual like in general and you bring it up, it's not something that's like okay...because it's just very frowned upon and talked bad about, you know, so especially if you're a guy too.

When asked about how they perceive the use of this film in counselor education, Giselle reiterated her previous statements regarding her exposure to Chiron. Giselle maintained:

Like it really kind of opens your eyes to a lot of different things that a client could go through. Like I said earlier, there's a lot of different layers to him and there was a lot of different battles that he was struggling with at once and it's just like I feel like this would be good to use because you have the socioeconomics thing, you have the drugs, you got him being an African American in an inner-city school. It just shows a lot of different cultural differences that we don't really recognize or some of us do recognize with. But it's just a very good movie with a lot of depth.

These comments suggest that participants felt as though *Moonlight* helped them to better understand the intersectional experiences of others, particularly marginalized clients.

### **Counselor Self-Awareness**

The emergence of this theme was informed by comments that reflected greater self-awareness of limitations, sensitivities, and biases. In their written reflections, some participants recognized cultural and social issues and conditions with which they have no personal experience. HM wrote, "It was difficult for me to relate to Chiron because our personal experiences and identities don't intersect that much." Similarly, Giselle noted, "I am unfamiliar with inner city life and being African American." KJ advised, "I don't know what it is like to struggle with sexuality on top of everything else he has going on." GT wrote, "I did not ever have to face racial oppression,

growing up with unloving or drug-addicted parents, never struggled with sexual identity issues or heavy bullying.”

During the focus group interview, a couple of participants discussed ways in which the film could facilitate counselor self-awareness. Victoria, when asked about the pedagogic potential of using the film *Moonlight* in counselor education, stated that the film might be of assistance in regard to assessing one’s qualifications. Victoria stated:

Knowing your limitations. Like knowing that you’re not qualified to work with a certain client, you know? Like you can’t relate to what they have been through. It’s not like you don’t want to, it’s like you think someone else that you work with could be more beneficial.

Mike noted the potential benefits of the film, advising that it might help counseling interns with “identifying what we are comfortable with hearing and identifying like better ways to care for ourselves.” Similarly, HM expressed that the film may aid counseling interns in identifying their sensitivities. HM stated:

I think, too, this will help us to know some of our triggers. You know there might be a situation in one of these videos, you know, where maybe you’ve been abused or something and when you see a situation then you know whether or not you could handle it.

Some participants suggested that exposure to the film may affectively stimulate them. In this regard, some participants offered areas for caution. Mike advised that the film could be triggering for viewers who have experienced similar traumatic events as Chiron and although the film may be impactful it is likely an experience that one “would like probably really need to personally soak up. So that could be like a disclaimer for other people who are, you know, maybe have that similar history.” Jessica cautioned that the language might be offensive to some individuals, specifically the use of racial expletives. Jessica noted:

Like I know African Americans that take offense to that. They would not like this movie because it is said, you know what I mean? Like my dad refuses to use that word. Period. Like cannot be used around him.

Additionally, participants also indicated that the film might help viewers to identify and acknowledge their biases. Claire articulated this notion explicitly when she stated the following:

I think it will also help you identify like biases that you may have. Like if you're watching a film and you're like "oh I don't really like that, I don't really agree with that," you know, maybe you shouldn't work with that population, you know, if you're not able to put that aside, if it really strikes that reaction in you. That's something to kind of look at, too.

The findings indicate that some participants suggested *Moonlight* has the potential to assist counseling interns with thinking about, and possibly feeling, their sensitivities and biases.

### **Discussion**

Participants in this study reported experiencing numerous emotions throughout the film and indicated that these reactions varied greatly in terms of intensity. These findings confirmed that *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) definitely served as a pedagogical device that profoundly stimulated participants' affective reactions and thus met the criteria of a concrete experience (Pugh, 2014). Participants' reactions demonstrated that they could feel the pain and sorrow of Chiron. This phenomenon reinforced the power of films and expanded on the legitimization of their pedagogic potential in experiential learning (Rousse, 2016). Additionally, the processes of gaining awareness through strong, sometimes uncomfortable, emotions and collaborative meaning-making that occurred in the focus group represent constructivist action in work, similar to that documented by Nittoli and Guiffrida (2017). Discussion of the participants' experiences and perceptions encouraged each participant to critically reflect on the construction of their own worldview and to intentionally assess the foundations of their knowledge. The study also reiterates the notion that counselors' conceptualization of clients' experiences and needs are partially

informed by their foundational knowledge or lack thereof. These findings illuminate the potential for *Moonlight* to facilitate CITs' development in the MSJCC aspirational domains of attitudes and beliefs and knowledge (Ratts et al., 2016).

Novel to this study, participants worked together to make sense of their emotional reactions to *Moonlight* and how they were similar to emotional reactions evoked by clients' stories. From a relational and intersectional perspective, the idea of counselors needing to prioritize clients' needs suggests that participants recognize, to a degree, the power differential inherent in the counseling relationship. Participants' construction of emotional management as a necessary counselor aspiration represents an integration of the personal observations related to emotional reactivity of clients' stories into a theory that attempts to postulate the effects of said emotional reactivity in the presence of clients, which is illustrative of the third stage of the experiential learning cycle espoused by Kolb (1984). *Moonlight* appears to be an effective stimulus for conversations about intersectional identities, marginalization, and oppression; and therefore, indicates that the film is a useful pedagogical device in the realm of multicultural and social justice counseling (Shannon, 2020).

Exposure to *Moonlight* yielded responses regarding potential challenges that some may encounter when exposed to the film, including sensitivity to the depiction of sexual relations, offensive language, and/or content that may potentially trigger viewers' personal trauma histories. *Moonlight* highlights issues such as race, gender, religion, and socioeconomic status, which may be polarizing for audiences and evoke powerful reactions and defensiveness. Frick et al. (2017) advised that values held by students "may be deeply entrenched depending upon the environment in which they were raised and educated" (p. 197). *Moonlight* served as an impetus to generate critical reflection regarding what constitutes competence and what indicates preparedness. These



areas of contemplation are pivotal for neophyte counselors to incorporate within themselves as they start their careers and develop their professional counselor identity (Ratts et al., 2016). Overall, the findings of this study also reinforce previous conclusions that multicultural film-based pedagogy can broaden students' worldviews, challenge their assumptions (Shen, 2015), and increase perceptions of multicultural counseling self-efficacy among CITs (Greene et al., 2014).

### **Implications for Counselor Educators**

Counselor educators might want to strongly consider employing multicultural and intersectional film-based pedagogy in a multitude of counseling courses to both reinforce and model the importance of lifelong learning (Ratts et al., 2016) and provide CITs with more exposure to diverse experiences, which may be particularly helpful for those who are culturally encapsulated. Integrating *Moonlight* activities with more diverse groups of CITs, may lead to a greater exchange of cultural knowledge and afford culturally encapsulated CITs the opportunity to increase their awareness of varied intersectional experiences and perceptions of the film's content. CITs who have more accessible knowledge and lived experiences related to the characters' identities may generate qualitatively different discussions in the classroom. Participants found *Moonlight* to be helpful with conceptualizing and understanding the impacts of parental substance use; the integration of *Moonlight*-based activities into curriculum for addictions counseling and/or family counseling courses might also be of pedagogical value. Participants' speculations about the nature of characters' circumstances, histories, and environments indicated they were open to understanding these influences on characters' behaviors. *Moonlight*, in conjunction with constructivist dialogue, might engender in-depth gestation and contextualization of characters' backgrounds, which then may be helpful in understanding future clients' behaviors, in the context of their ecological systems.

In addition to normalizing the idea that “learning about privileged and marginalized clients may sometimes be unfamiliar and uncomfortable experiences” (Ratts et al., 2016, p. 39), counselor educators who intentionally integrate the use of this film might provide their students with an opportunity to experience and learn to navigate their emotions in a controlled environment for abstract conceptualization. The creation of opportunities to discuss compassion fatigue, vicarious traumatization, and self-care practices should be prioritized. Despite the proposed benefits of disrupting complacency, the use of films that portray difficult scenes related to cultural identities, oppression, and social problems does pose risks that counselor educators should carefully contemplate and prepare for (Elliott & Sommer, 2017; Frick et al., 2017). Educators should develop understanding of and express the potential benefits, risks, and rationale for any film-related activity to students. See Shannon (2020) for more ideas on how to integrate *Moonlight* into counseling curriculum. Furthermore, counselor educators should include a detailed disclaimer in the course syllabus and make resources available to students, such as contact information for campus counseling centers and instructor availability to process reactions in a private setting. In order to mitigate defensiveness and encourage openness, educators should consider establishing a safe constructivist classroom to ensure that all students understand that perspectives on issues may vary and to be respectful of differences (Elliott & Sommer, 2017). Although becoming mildly agitated in response to other students’ opinions and perspectives might be a normal reaction, graduate students are also expected to develop the ability to rationally and deliberately consider issues from multiple perspectives (Frick et al., 2017).

Counselor educators are role models for CITs and therefore must be able to share about their journey of identity development in order to reduce students’ hesitancy regarding conversations about marginalization, oppression, privilege, and power. Counselors who do not

model such behaviors may inadvertently signal that such topics are not appropriate or beneficial to discuss. Educators should consider taking an active participant role in the constructivist classroom and contribute to the meaning-making process by being as vulnerable as they expect their students to be. This strategy balances the educator-student relationship by removing oneself from a purely evaluative role, which could be comforting to CITs who fear judgment for having limited exposure to or understanding of diverse communities. For more information on broaching multicultural and social justice issues, including race see Day-Vines et al. (2020) and Sue et al. (2009).

Counselor educators who desire to engage students in meaningful experiential learning should consider designing a multifaceted film-based activity that allows for critical self-reflexivity. Although group discussion might serve as the catalyst for students' co-construction of knowledge related to the film, some students might prefer a less invasive means of reflection. Reflective-based written or asynchronous online discussion assignments can be utilized for this purpose. Counselor educators who plan to use *Moonlight* in their courses could intensify its impact by ensuring that students have a firm and clear understanding of the six fundamental themes of intersectionality theory (Collins & Blige, 2016) prior to implementing the film-based activities. Findings infer that intersectional film-based experiential activities might promote multicultural and social justice counseling proficiency among practicing counselors and counselor educators, as these activities could be integrated into individual and group supervision and professional development programs. Lastly, such activities could be employed to facilitate understanding and conversations about differences with clients in counseling and with communities in general.

### **Limitations and Considerations for the Pedagogic Use of *Moonlight***

One limitation of this study is the overall lack of diversity represented in the sample. Participants with varied racial identities and backgrounds would likely increase the richness of discussion and processing as the diversity in perspective might yield additional insights and perceptions to be shared and understood by others. Another limitation of this study relates to participants' area of specialization in counseling. Participants involved in this study were enrolled in a clinical mental health counseling internship course, and for this reason, findings may not be transferrable with groups of counseling students or interns with disparate specializations such as school counseling, rehabilitation counseling, or marriage and family counseling. Findings may not be transferrable to all settings as the quality of the multicultural counseling instruction offered at other institutions might result in students feeling more or less prepared to work with issues of diversity. Another limitation of this study is characterized by the role that the author played. As counselor educators are afforded more time to build rapport and connect with students, their experiences with facilitating discussions about students' reactions to *Moonlight* might yield contextually different results; however, the evaluative nature of the counselor educator role might encumber some students.

### **Future Research**

Researchers interested in the pedagogic potential of *Moonlight* could design studies that utilized more diverse participant samples. Studies that produce knowledge regarding the experiences and perceptions of the film from male-identified, gender non-conforming, and racially/ethnically diverse participants would provide greater insight into *Moonlight*'s ability to affectively stimulate learning across identities. Researchers could build upon this study by recruiting participants whose counseling specializations vary, as divergent specializations might

inform participants' experiences and perceptions of the film in such a way that qualitatively different knowledge is constructed. Future studies could also evaluate the outcomes of employing the use of *Moonlight* to teach intersectionality theory (Shannon, 2020).

In regard to the use of film-based pedagogy in multicultural counselor education, there is also opportunity for research developments. The author echoes Nittoli and Guiffrida's (2017) call for research to examine the use of popular film to facilitate advocacy and action among CITs. Furthermore, researchers might consider exploring the untapped scholarly realm of film-based supervision activities. Finally, this basic qualitative study produced findings that elicit hypotheses that could be tested via quantitative or mixed methods studies.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from this basic qualitative study have provided insights into counseling interns' perceptions and experiences of the popular film *Moonlight* and suggest that its pedagogical use has numerous benefits. *Moonlight* is a dynamic intersectional film that has the potential to disrupt complacency among its viewers by evoking varied emotional reactions to issues of injustice, bullying, and discrimination. Divergent understandings of the film prompted collaborative and constructivist exchanges among participants in order to filter impressions and make-meaning of their experiences, as well as the experiences of the film's characters. These findings also suggest that *Moonlight*, when used in film-based pedagogical practice, is an experiential activity that facilitates the affective domain of learning and contributes to counseling interns' increased understanding of and perceived preparedness to work with diverse clients.

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