

Action Research in Taiwan: Development and Inclusion of Feminist Principles in Counselor Training

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Abstract

This study presents the results of training designed to enhance students' awareness of gender consciousness and gender attitudes in counseling. The participants were 49 master's degree students (19 male; 30 female; average age, 34 years). We adopted the methodology of action research and took a feminist standpoint. Five focus-group interviews were conducted with students to discuss and share what they learned from the new 'Gender and Counseling' unit. The results suggest that some graduate students were able to accept gender pluralism, some expressed astonishment at being in contact with lecturers, and others displayed the profound influence of traditional Chinese culture and insisted that gender pluralism breeds social unrest.

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1. Introduction

Multicultural competence is a necessary skill for counseling psychologists (Sehgal et al., 2001). As early as 1994, CACREP (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs) started to promote gender-sensitive counseling practices in the United States (Gold & Hawley, 2001). In 2001, CACREP proposed that gender issues should be included in the general education of counselors. In the meantime, the American Psychological Association also started to require graduate programs in psychology to provide training on multicultural issues (Collins et al., 2005). By 1991, masters and doctoral programs in the United States were incorporating gender or gender-related

courses into their curricula. Multicultural capability has a great effect on the development of a counselor's ethnic identity and gender role (Chao, & Nath, 2011).

Multicultural training influences one's awareness, knowledge, and multicultural counseling skills. In personal, clinical, social, and political contexts counselors have to be able to detect the influence of socially defined gender roles during counseling (Owen, & Wong, 2009; Seem, & Clark, 2006; Smith, Constantine, Dunn, Dinehart, & Montoya, 2006).

Gender stereotypes can affect counselors' professional judgment and their subsequent choice of treatment plan (Dillon, Worthington, Soth-McNett, & Schwartz, 2008). Counselors who fail to detect their own gender biases may find themselves limited when making appropriate gender-related decisions concerning their clients. They might force their own gender-related values and beliefs onto their clients and then provide treatment according to their biased assessment and evaluation. Counseling is widely considered a feminine job and male counselors are in a minority (Devoe, 1990; Quinn, & Chan, 2009). Gender socialization poses a challenge to counselors as it is often part of a client's identity issues. Students of counseling psychology should explore their personal gender value system and be aware of the influence of gender bias in counseling (Dodson, & Borders, 2006; Dupuy, & Rithie, 1994). Counselors who are more aware of their gender-related attitudes are also usually more sensitive to cultural and identity issues.

2. Literature review

Gender-related issues form a critical component in counselor training (Gudhlanga, Chirimuuta, & Bhukuvhani, 2012; Hoffman, 1996; Knoll, & Ratzer, 2009), yet insufficient gender-related training and education is provided for graduate students studying counseling psychology (Chao, & Nath, 2011; Daniluk, & Stein, 1995; Gold, & Hawley, 2001; Mellinger, & Liu, 2006; Miller, & Byers, 2010). Therefore, gender issues should be included in the curriculum of counselor training programs.

Action research enables reflection on and criticism of teaching practices. Teachers participating in the action research plan will be able to apply the actions during their teaching and systematically assist students to develop contextual consciousness. They may also be able to construct a theory basis through the enhancement of clinical experience, or gain a new framework by challenging their old perspectives during the reflective process after the teaching practice.

Many counseling and psychotherapy theories are based on male-oriented knowledge (Gibson & Myers, 2000). Male experiences are generally assumed to be the default experience of all human beings and the curriculum is often defined from a masculine perspective. Gender is a crucial contextual factor in the issues involved in counseling cases, and may influence the treatment plan and the counseling goals. Many female issues are a result of political and social situations. The cultural and political environment may also affect male mental development. Suffering often originates from an oppressive environment. Gender socialization of males may lead to violence, rape, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment. On the other hand, gender socialization of females may lead to depression or eating disorders. In addition, male gender socialization may cause isolation, depression, drug abuse,

emotional suppression, and compulsive disorders (McCarthy, & Holliday, 2004; Pederson, & Vogel, 2007).

In the 1970s, one of the important goals of professional counseling training was to eliminate sexism in counseling training, practice, and research (Devoe, 1990; Dupuy, & Ritchie, 1994; Rayle, 2005). The social and cultural context of the counselors and their clients not only influences gender-related treatment but also affects the development of the counseling relationship constructed between the client and the counselor. Counselors should be aware of the effects of gender-related factors on assessment and evaluation. They should also increase their knowledge concerning the interactions between gender and other cultural factors, examine their own gender biases and conscious and subconscious expectations, and pay attention to expressions of gender-related phenomena such as sexual abuse, date violence, and sexual harassment. It is necessary to examine the influence of the stereotyped male gender role on male mental development and to evaluate male clients' gender role conflicts and pressures, including emotional suppression, socialized control over power and competition, homophobia, restrictions on sexuality and emotion, pursuit of achievement and success, and health issues (Stracuzzi, Mohr, & Fuertes, 2011; Wester, McDonough, White, Vogel, & Taylor, 2010). Counselors' biases might cause misjudgments and untimely interventions.

Education is the most effective and beneficial way of introducing gender equality. Bifocal courses or courses based on a transformational learning model allow graduates to be introduced to a new curriculum without changing the existing framework. This type of infused teaching inserts the new learning content into appropriate existing courses, and is thus an economical and beneficial way to alter the teaching. In our research, design units were infused into an existing curriculum for teaching counseling and psychotherapy theories to graduate students.

3. Problem statement

Analytical results of the researcher's previous study into counseling services and education of students in Taiwan show that it is critical to enhance the university teaching of gender equality. Across all the colleges and departments in Taiwan, thousands of masters and doctoral students are trained in the field of counseling psychology every year. Yet their understanding of gender issues is limited to the discussions within the psychology classroom and does not extend to the gender phenomena observed in counseling and psychotherapy practices.

Most counseling theories consider clients' issues to be personal rather than a reflection of social conditions (Chao, 2011; Choate, 2009; Daniluk, & Stein, 1995; Good, & Heppner, 1995; Gudhlanga, Chirimuuta, & Bhukuvhani, 2012). For example, humanistic psychology emphasizes responsibility and overlooks the influence of social hierarchy on relationships. Reality therapy also fails to consider the effects of gender, race, and social hierarchy. On the other hand, feminism and behavioral therapy both emphasize environmental effects on personal development, and multicultural counseling examines the issues of oppression and is based on the concept that cultural context influences social and psychological development.

A counseling curriculum that focuses on gender issues can provide students with a wider and deeper understanding of the influence of gender both on their clients' lives and on the counseling

process. Adopting an infusion model will help raise students' awareness of gender-related issues. Therefore, in this research, we infused 'Gender and Counseling' units into the curriculum for counseling graduate students in the Department of Applied Psychology at Husan Chuang University in Taiwan.

4. Purpose of the study

We attempted to design a curriculum according to the characteristics of the school and the students and then performed a multi-faceted study to understand the implementation of the designed action plan. We studied students' reactions, the obstacles encountered during implementation of the plan, effective coping strategies, and the researchers' reflections on the action plan infusion curriculum. It is anticipated that this research will provide insight into effective infusion of gender issues into counseling and psychotherapy theories and practice.

The goals of this research were as follow: (1) to increase emphasis on gender phenomena in the curriculum of the selected department in order to enhance students' awareness of sexism on campus and enable them to deal with the situation properly; (2) to heighten students' awareness of gender consciousness and gender attitudes in the theories and practice of counseling and psychotherapy; (3) to deconstruct gender stereotypes inherent in the theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy to enhance the cultivation of gender equality in counseling; and (5) to develop a school-oriented 'Gender and Counseling' unit that suits the local characteristics.

5. Research methods

5.1 Research approach

The methodology of action research was adopted to explore the infusion of gender issues into the teaching of counseling and psychotherapy theories and practice. In addition to improving the quality of teaching and learning, we anticipated that the research would result in constructive reflection on the teaching of counseling and psychotherapy. Furthermore, this research takes the literature on feminist teaching into consideration. Feminist teaching integrates ethnicity, gender, and social hierarchy and emphasizes emotional and empirical learning. It encourages teachers and students to construct the knowledge together. The students are given the role of active learners and leaders, so every participant has the freedom and responsibility to become both the learner and the teacher. These principles were used to construct the 'Gender and Counseling' units used in this research.

For the study, we used lectures, debates and roundtables, expert symposia, role play, reading, guided reading groups, and film appreciation. The topics of the five-week readings and group discussions were: (1) the expectations of gender roles and the influence on counseling issues; (2) the suitability of counselors for their clients; (3) counseling with cross-gender clients; (4) gender and psychological disorders; and (5) gender issues in counseling supervision.

5.2 Research participants

The 49 study participants included first-year students on a standard master's program. Among the 48 participants, 19 were male and 29 were female, and the average age was 31 years. Age ranges were as follows: 21 students were aged 21–25 years, 10 were aged 26–30 years, three were aged 31–35 years, two were aged 36 to 40 years old, seven were aged 41–45 years, one was aged 46–50 years, and three were aged 51–55 years. The 'Gender and Counseling' unit was infused into the Seminars on Theories of Counseling and Psychotherapy course from the fourth to the eighth weeks of the semester.

The researcher was also an instructor and was thus an important tool in this qualitative research. The personal and professional experience, training, and perspective of the researcher are all factors that affect the data collection, analysis, explanation, and credibility of the research. The researcher has a Ph. D. in counseling psychology and has published several qualitative studies. The researcher conducted the interviews and analyzed the data in this study. A co-coder was recruited to help the researchers reduce the possibility of bias. The co-coder is female, holds doctoral degree in counseling psychology, and has experience in qualitative research.

6. Research process

The research procedures are described below. (1) Preparation: Data collection and research design; course unit plans; discussion with the related personnel before the semester and job assignment; preparation of teaching materials and other related materials. (2) Course teaching and collecting the necessary materials for the research: Collecting research materials and conduction of reflective writing by the teacher (the researcher) to serve as part of the research materials during the process of teaching. (3) Writing the unit review: Participants write a required unit review after each unit course and upload it to the internet, forming part of the teaching feedback and research materials. (4) Teaching feedback form: Participants fill out a form about their thoughts and feelings concerning the unit at the end of each course. (5) Focus group interviews: Volunteers for the focus group interview are recruited after the unit course. (6) Data analysis: Organize the students reviews collected during the course, the feedback forms, the teacher's reflective materials, and transcripts of the interviews; conduct the analysis.

All focus group interviews were conducted by the researcher. A summary of the questions is as follows: (1) Please give your thoughts on and review of the lectures on gender conducted by Instructor Kao Hsukuan and Instructor Rabbit; (2). Please give your thoughts on and review of the lecture on homosexuality; (3) Please give your thoughts on and review of the lectures on campus counseling and gender; (4) Please give your thoughts on and review of the lectures on community counseling and gender; (5). Please give your thoughts on and review of the handouts and roundtable discussion on gender; (6) What other things do you want to learn about gender and counseling in the future?

Five interviews were conducted at the end of the unit. Each interview was lasted between 1 and 2 hours. The researcher then transcribed the recordings, established the data, and analyzed the text. The researcher first read each transcription and underlined the significant units, and then conceptualized these units. The coding of the significant units was then organized into topics and

categories. The similar topics were combined into a category. In addition to following the infusion teaching plan, the researcher kept a journal of reflections on the teaching activities.

7. Findings

The results are presented in four parts: feedback on the special symposia, handout reading, and feedback on the roundtable discussion, the written gender autobiography reviews, and the reflections of the researcher.

7.1 Feedback on the special symposia

According to results from the five-point Likert Scale questionnaires on the four expert symposia, most students felt very satisfied (72%) or satisfied (27%) with the activity procedure and arrangement, the activity schedule and location, the activity theme and content, the professional knowledge of the lecturers, and the time control of the lecturers. Few students felt that the symposia were average. Average scores were given mainly for the activity schedule and arrangement, activity theme and content, and time control.

The end-of-the-term reviews showed that the students benefited from the symposia in four main ways. First, their value system was challenged, they gained understanding of social and cultural influence, they learned about transgender issues, and they reflected on their own thoughts. Second, they gained understanding of the process of homosexual identification and of the sources of pressure for homosexual people and they learned about the features of different sexualities. Third, the students learned about the school counseling environment. The combination of counseling practice and sample cases was helpful for students' understanding of the importance of empathy and the difficulties of school counseling. Last, the students learned about child therapy, the need to enhance professional training, and gained understanding of the application of counseling practices.

The focused interviews also demonstrated that students benefited from the symposia. First, students invoked multi-gendered thinking, reflected on the myth of gender stereotypes, and considered gender in the context of the helping practices. Second, students gained understanding of the identity predicament facing homosexual people, gained a greater acceptance of diverse sexualities, and increased their care for minorities. Third, students reflected on the insufficiencies of professional skills, gained understanding of the school counseling model, received reminders about self-care, and learned to better utilize social support. Last, the students considered the various issues more deeply, explored the issues with open minds, gained an understanding of the connection between a therapeutic attitude and desired change, and learned to create a counseling environment. In summary, the effects of the symposia on the students were fourfold: they received instruction in both theory and practice, they had opportunities for increased self-exploration and reflection, they learned about the influence of social and cultural contexts, and their value systems were challenged and transformed.

7.2 Handout reading and feedback from the roundtable discussion

According to the feedback from the roundtable discussion, most students felt very satisfied (55%) or satisfied (41%) with the activity procedure and arrangement, the activity schedule and location, the activity theme and content, the professional knowledge of the lecturers, and the time control of the lecturers. Few students (4%) graded the roundtable discussion as average and only one student was dissatisfied (with the activity schedule). The student reviews for this activity showed that students learned to understand the effects of gender on both themselves and counseling. They accepted the necessity of gender-education training: counselors must be aware of gender issues, think about gender connotations, and consider the influence of gender from multiple aspects. Furthermore, counselors must consider the suitability of the client–counselor relationship from a gender perspective and think about the influence of gender and culture on counseling. The students learned the principles of homosexual counseling and feminist counseling, and about the need for more training on multicultural counseling skills. Lastly, the students gained an understanding of the role of gender differences in psychological disorders, and of gender and power issues in supervisory relationships.

7.3 Written gender autobiographies

The findings from the students' written gender autobiography reviews were as follows. Students reviewed their life events that related to gender, reconsidered their gender values, organized their own gender knowledge, and examined their confusions about gender. Furthermore, they clarified gender stereotypes, faced their own sexism, discovered the influence of social, cultural, and familial factors on gender roles, and became more aware of the influence of gender in life.

7.4 Reflections of the researcher

Infusion of gender-related issues into a counseling course is beneficial to graduate students studying counseling. The schedule chosen in this study was able to accommodate most students, although there were a few students who could not participate in all the activities due to conflicts at the weekend. The lecturers hired in this action plan were all experienced teachers or practitioners in their fields and were thus a great help to the students. The reading materials and discussions corresponded to the selected topics and allowed the students to gain a better understanding of the topics over and above the lectures. All activities were voluntary and added bonus points to the course grades; therefore, most students accepted the activities. In general, the students responded well to writing their gender autobiography and used this opportunity to consider the development of their own gender consciousness.

7.5 Discussion and conclusions

The results indicate that the gender-infused counseling course influenced the students and teachers both as individuals and in their approach to professional counseling. In terms of the effects on the individual participants, the teachers continued to increase their knowledge of gender pluralism and the students recognized conflicting values, took the issue of gender discrimination seriously, and reflected on and clarified gender stereotypes. The results of this study support those of Chao and Nath (2011), in which the counselors held conventional gender stereotypes and lacked multicultural counseling skills.

In addition, in this study when students reflected on gender-related incidents in their past, they realized how society and the family environment affected and confined their gender concepts. Similar to Daniluk and Stein's (1995) findings on the effects of a gender-inclusive curriculum, the present study showed that a gender-infused course enabled the students to understand themselves better and explore issues surrounding gender.

The effect exerted by the modified course on the students' approach to professional counseling surprised the teachers and inspired much reflection and discussion. The students reported that the course helped them to connect theory with practice and taught them to contemplate the effects of gender and culture on counseling. As described above, they learned that counselors must consider the suitability of the client-counselor relationship from a gender perspective, learn the principles of homosexual counseling, and understand gender and power issues in supervisory relationships. They also learned to reflect on inadequacies in professional competence and recognize the need for additional training on gender issues and multicultural counseling skills. These results are similar to those of Dupuy and Ritchie (1994), and show that appropriate training can provide students with insights into the critical effects that gender has on a person's life and on the counseling process. The lecture on gender issues that was delivered via infusion helped students increase their awareness of gender issues. However, Chao (2011) reported that training affects knowledge, rather than awareness. In the present study, knowledge and awareness were both improved, which is consistent with the findings of Good (1995), Hansman et al (1999), and Choate (2009). In a graduate counseling course on gender issues, experience is a vital source of knowledge and personal and group experiences are both valuable. Research and academic knowledge are also crucial, and students are encouraged to compare their personal experiences with theory. Through interaction, the students are made aware of interacting factors such as gender, race, social class, physiology, and sexual orientation, and this affects the students' learning outcomes.

On the basis of the results and the reflections of the researcher, the following suggestions are proposed. Additional learning plans should be arranged and implemented for students, such as courses on sex counseling and courses on case practice with clients. Graduate schools should provide more resources to help students who cannot accept multiple genders. Similar courses should be provided to students to enhance their understanding of multi-gender concepts. Subsequent gender autobiographies and group discussions should be conducted to invoke students' thoughts. On a practical note, the course schedule should be flexible to enable students to participate. Lecturers with practical experience should be invited to lecture on their specialized fields. Lastly, students should have an opportunity to present what they have learned in a wrap-up presentation.

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