Social and Emotional Barriers in Online Graduate Counseling Programs: Recommendations for Effective Practice for Working with Hispanic Adult Learners

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Abstract

Hispanic learners in higher education face unique challenges and barriers to success. An understanding of Adult Learning Theory through the lens of Hispanic culture is imperative, particularly in relation to both social and emotional barriers that are likely to disrupt the graduate learning process. The responsibility to effectively lead and educate such learners falls into the hands of counselor educators in higher education. When considering ethnic diversity among adult learners, it is imperative to explore effective practice methodologies for students from specific cultures/ethnic origins. The purpose of this semi-systematic review was to explore the case of Jen, a Hispanic/Latina graduate student enrolled in an online masters in clinical mental health counseling program, and to synthesize implications for effective practice in educating and working with Hispanic students.

Keywords: Social barriers; Emotional barriers; Online Graduate Programs; Hispanic Learners.

1. Introduction

Diversity does not disappear in the online learning environment, and barriers for adult learners still exist. According to Yarbough [1], there is an anticipation of continuous online learning growth and expansion, and thus "e-learning professionals must ensure that their online classrooms are not only taking advantage of technology but incorporating the widely accepted and significantly important adult learning theories" [1:1]. An understanding of Adult Learning Theory through the lens of Hispanic culture is imperative, particularly in relation to both social and emotional barriers that are likely to disrupt the graduate learning process. The responsibility to effectively lead and educate such learners falls into the hands of counselor educators in higher education.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this semi-systematic review was to explore the case of Jen, a Hispanic/Latina graduate student enrolled in an online masters in clinical mental health counseling program, and to synthesize implications for effective practice in educating and working with Hispanic students for counselor educators (CEs) and related faculty/staff while considering culturally relevant specifics that may influence the adult learning process and professional practice outcomes.

2. Methods

The methodology featured a semi-systematic literature review. Authors in [2,3] note that the semi-systematic literature review is advantageous in that it offers a different conceptualization of matters that are complex, making full systematic review less obtainable. Furthermore, the semi-systematic literature review lends the opportunity to "identify and understand all potentially relevant research traditions that have implications for the studies topic and to synthesize these using meta-narratives" [2:335].

3. Adult Learning Theory

In reference to the rise of online learning, the understanding of Adult Learning Theory has become more imperative for educators teaching through Online Communities of Practice (OCOPs). Thus, "adult learning is a lifelong process whereby knowledge is formed through the transformation of adults' experience" [4:1663]. After conducting a thorough systematic review of such OCOPs, [4] and colleagues found that members of these web-based communities presented with similar qualities including being "independent, experience-centered, problem-centered, self-motivated, goal-oriented, and lifelong learners with the purpose to achieve professional outcomes" [4:1663]. It was also discovered that characteristics such as age, technology barriers, one's motivation and ability to self-regulate among others were relative to the level of engagement adult learners display. Researchers in [5] conducted a literature review of Adult Learning Theories for educators, and broke them up into seven distinct categories, namely, "instrumental, humanistic, transformative, social, motivational, reflective, and constructivist learning theories" [5:1], all of which fall under the category of Constructivist thought.

When considering ethnic diversity among adult learners, it is imperative to explore effective practice methodologies for students from specific cultures/ethnic origins. The current case of Jen will provide a glimpse into the complications that may arise when a student's cultural and ethnic background is not considered in an academic decision-making process.

3.1 Diversity: Hispanic Learners in Higher Education

Hispanic learners in higher education face unique challenges and barriers to success, including linguistic and cultural differences, limited access to financial resources, and a lack of supportive networks [6]. Improving the effectiveness of faculty in supporting these students is crucial in increasing their success in higher education. The researchers in [7] conducted a literature review on the experiences of Latinos in higher education, highlighting the underrepresentation of Hispanics in higher education and the disparities in their academic outcomes compared to their non-Hispanic peers. Additionally, the author notes the importance of addressing cultural and linguistic differences in the classroom and creating a supportive learning environment for Hispanic students. The researchers in [8] also address the experiences of culturally diverse distance learners, including Hispanic students. The authors emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity in the design and delivery of distance education programs and suggest that institutions should provide resources and support to address the unique needs of these students.

3.2 Social and Emotional Barriers

Social barriers for Hispanic learners can include broad terminology that do not personalize what their cultural needs are, acknowledging issues that surround undocumented students, a limited understanding of the history between the student's country of origin and the United States by faculty, and overgeneralization of understanding of students' culture without humility from faculty perspective [9]. Degree of assimilation to American culture, status of student (international, first generation, minority student, etc.), and the intersections of these identities are to be considered when establishing relationships with Hispanic learners [9]. Racialized experiences, resistance, and disruption to the norm are also social barriers to consider when working with Hispanic learners as they form their professional identity in clinical mental health counseling programs [10].

Regarding emotional barriers, burnout, extraversion expectations, personal, and professional influences are all experiences to consider when working with students from marginalized populations [11,12,13]. For counselor educators in an online environment, considering how to not only create inclusive spaces but also a connection of belonging for students is essential to the development of their professional identity as professional counselors. In the Professional Practices Committee process and through other remedial efforts, counselor educators should always consider cultural and social justice issues when decision making and keeping student development a priority. As counselor educators, is there a space where BIPOC students can freely be themselves without judgment or fear? Is this space created for faculty from the BIPOC community?

3.3 Professional Practices Committee Referral: A Case Scenario

Jen is a practicum student within the clinical mental health counseling program at a faith-based institution and

has been referred to the Professional Practices Committee (PPC) by her faculty supervisor through the completion of a dispositional issue referral. The faculty supervisor reports that Jen has an unpleasant attitude and presents with psychological fitness issues due to family functioning that she has privately disclosed and is no longer welcome back to her practicum site. This has caused concerns about Jen's ability to work with clients. The faculty supervisor also requests that Jen not move forward into her next courses until these concerns are addressed. It is unclear in the report if Jen was formally terminated from her site or if a mutual parting has been established.

When the PPC meets to review Jen's case, the first data that is provided by administration from the academic program is that Jen had all her evaluations completed by both her faculty and site supervisor with ratings of excellent and reviews of her success with clients. Jen provided emails to her site supervisor related to questions about supervision sessions that were mostly focused on her wellness and family functioning instead of client issues. Jen also provided a statement that outlined the site supervisor discussing client information with an adult client's family without client consent. Jen also disclosed that she felt that neither of her supervisors understood her role within her family of origin or her culture, but she did not feel comfortable bringing this up because she felt it was her personal responsibility to manage.

It is important to note that the site supervisor in this case is a middle-aged, Caucasian female who lacks an understanding of Hispanic culture and who has not attended any formal training on how to effectively work with diverse counselors in training.

Jen is a twenty-two-year-old Hispanic/Latina and first-generation college student who is fluent in both Spanish and English.

3.4 Ethics

In the case of Jen, it is easy to understand how a counselor in training who is a member of the BIPOC community can limit discussions with faculty about how they feel and not want to bring attention to things that are uncomfortable for them. The power difference between faculty and student requires faculty to uphold competencies and training to address the diverse needs that students bring. The following is a list of American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014) sections that address responsibilities of counselor educators that can be applied to the case of Jen.

3.4.a F.7.b. Counselor Educator Competence

Counselors who function as counselor educators or supervisors provide instruction within their areas of knowledge and competence and provide instruction based on current information and knowledge available in the profession [14].

Case Scenario Connection

The implication related to the case of Jen, is for the supervisor to proactively abstain from training in

multicultural competencies to provide ethical supervision to Jen.

3.4.b F.7.c. Infusing Multicultural Issues/Diversity

Counselor educators infuse material related to multiculturalism/diversity into all courses and workshops for the development of professional counselors [14].

Case Scenario Connection

Was this occurring in the classroom that Jen was in or was the faculty supervisor shying away from acknowledging the role of race/culture/identity within the classroom?

3.4.c F.7.e. Teaching Ethics

Throughout the program, counselor educators ensure that students are aware of the ethical responsibilities and standards of the profession and the ethical responsibilities of students to the profession. Counselor educators infuse ethical considerations throughout the curriculum [14].

Case Scenario Connection

Was the faculty supervisor addressing the ethical responsibility of counselors in training to assess their own abilities and communicate with them or the site supervisor about limitations or concerns that they had? Was this done in a way that promoted social justice awareness?

3.4.d F.8.c. Self-Growth Experiences

Counselor educators are mindful of ethical principles when they require students to engage in self-growth experiences [14]. Counselor educators and supervisors inform students that they have a right to decide what information will be shared or withheld in class [14].

Case Scenario Connection

Was Jen told in the classroom that it is ok to share information about her concerns as a part of her own growth or was the faculty response to only look through a clinical lens and the students' humanity ignored?

3.4.e F.11.b. Student Diversity

Counselor educators actively attempt to recruit and retain a diverse student body. Counselor educators demonstrate commitment to multicultural/diversity competence by recognizing and valuing the diverse cultures and types of abilities that students bring to the training experience. Counselor educators provide appropriate accommodations that enhance and support diverse student well-being and academic performance [14].

Case Scenario Connection

How do clinical mental health programs create a sense of belonging to address students' feelings related to being a token, feeling like an outsider, or the complications related to their experience as a minority within a White structure? [10].

3.4.f F.11.c. Multicultural/Diversity Competence

Counselor educators actively infuse multicultural/diversity competency in their training and supervision practices. They actively train students to gain awareness, knowledge, and skills in the competencies of multicultural practice [14].

Case Scenario Connection

Did the Counselor Educator have opportunities for Hispanic diversity training? Why were these opportunities not taken?

4. Implications for the classroom

In the case scenario of Jen, she did not feel comfortable disclosing her discomfort to either her faculty or site supervisor. Both primarily focused on her role within her family dynamics, and she felt it was her own fault. BIPOC students often have their overall wellness affected by their interactions with discrimination [12]. For counselor educators in an online environment, identifying the nationality of Hispanic learners versus using a broad terminology, can help break down social barriers that students from Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Spain experience [9].

Creating space and proactively modeling dialogue about privilege, power, identity, and oppression are ways that counselor educators can begin to address social barriers [3] within an online environment. Ensuring that counselor educators and clinical sites engage in training that is specific to Hispanic learners is important. Training needs to include content related to multicultural and social justice competencies, theories that address intersections of race and professional identity, such as Critical Race Theory or Latino Critical Race Theory, and prioritize social justice work [3,10].

BIPOC counselors are faced with navigating emotional regulation due to microaggressions from work with clients[16]. What are counselor educators doing to prepare counselors in training within the classroom for this reality? A major consideration is creating qualitative research that allows for macro and micro narratives related to experiences to be included instead of strictly correlational data that reinforces problems due to systemic issues that have been historically established.

Another implication is the need to integrate culture-specific training interventions for faculty and staff members who are likely to influence the progression of an adult learner's academic experience. While it may be impossible to become knowledgeable about each and every culture/ethnic disposition of students, addressing individual cultures regularly through discussion, reading recommendations, and even small assessments could vastly improve the overall understanding and knowledge of diverse backgrounds. In addition, doing so would

equip faculty and staff with foundational knowledge that may ultimately guide their decision-making when working with graduate adult learners while contributing to the avoidance of ill-informed or culturally incompetent steps made by CE professionals who simply lack training and awareness.

Lastly, understanding what questions to prompt and pose may also help drive student-specific cultural competence in the counselor educator/supervisor/counselor in training dynamic. A list of available training options has been included for counselor educators/leaders wishing to integrate methods for addressing Hispanic culture-specific competencies into the workplace.

4.1 Limitations to the Review

Limitations to the current semi-systematic literature review included focusing primarily on Hispanic learner as well as those in higher education. Future reviews and research inquire may focus on alternative cultural or ethnic groups, education levels, and colleges/universities.

5. Conclusion

This semi-systematic literature review provided an overview of Adult Learning Theory, Hispanic learners in higher education, and social and emotional barriers that may exist through a case scenario. Recommendations were made and resources were provided for counselor educators in online higher education environments. Future research ought to provide similar review and recommendations for alternative diverse groups including but not limited to Asian adult learners, Russian adult learners, and African adult learners, with special insights and culture-specific aspects included. Findings from this current study highlight the importance of conducting more narrow and broader research regarding those social and/or emotional barriers that may present in the academic realm of education.

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6.   Conflict of interest

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Appendix A

Training Resources for Counselor Educators

The following resources have been identified from PESI:

Multicultural Awareness & Diversity: Powerful Strategies to Advance Client Rapport & Cultural Competence by Lambers Fisher, MS, MDiv, LMFT

Culturally Responsive Clinical Supervision: Ethical and Trauma-Informed Multicultural Supervision Strategies by Sonja Sutherland, PhD, LPC

Social Justice, Ethics and Multicultural Issues for Mental Health Professionals: Clinical Strategies for Inclusivity, Empowerment and Improved Treatment Outcomes by Lisa Connors, LBSW, LCPC, NCC

Racial and Generational Trauma: Evidence-based Somatic Interventions for BIPOC Clients by Chinwé Williams, PhD

2-Day: Medical Spanish for Healthcare Professionals: Going Further to Bridge the Communication Gap by Tracey Long, PhD, APRN, MS, MSN, CDE, CNE, CCRN