

The Relationship between Multicultural Service-Learning and Self-Reported Multicultural Competencies in Undergraduate Students: A Qualitative Participatory Action Study

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Abstract

In order to explore the link between multicultural service-learning (MSL) and the development of multicultural competence, a participatory action research paradigm and constructivist grounded theory were used to qualitatively explore the perceptions of multicultural competence development in 30 recreation and leisure studies majors. Major themes focused on student development as a result of MSL and the process by which this development occurred. Students reported increased awareness of their own culture and the cultural background of others, recognized privileges they hold on a variety of cultural factors, and developed an understanding of the process of MSL and the role it plays in developing multicultural competence.

KEYWORDS: *Multicultural competence, service-learning*

The population of the United States (U.S.) is becoming increasingly diverse, with self-identified racial and ethnic minorities projected to reach about 50% of the U.S. population by the year 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). This increased diversity has brought the importance of developing multicultural competent citizens to the forefront of higher education, with service-learning identified as one of the primary ways higher education can foster good citizenship development (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). In its ability to promote self-reflection, service learning is a unique tool that can help students reflect on multicultural differences toward achieving cultural competence. Within the field of public recreation, the need for learning opportunities for students with people who are “different” than themselves is crucial given the diverse nature of today’s society.

Service-learning can connect students with the world outside their classroom, as it places learning within a community context (O’Grady, 2000). There often exists opportunities for self-discovery and growth while introducing the complexities of a particular community issue. Students often gain an in-depth understanding of nuances and meaning that may not be as visible in a classroom setting or textbook. Therefore, service-learning is particularly useful for helping students to understand the complex issues surrounding multiculturalism, a vital component of higher education in today’s society (Sperling, 2007). Multicultural service-learning, is a specific type of service-learning that maintains the traditional goals of service-learning by promoting student learning and community service as equally important outcomes (Furco, 1996). However, MSL differs from traditional service-learning by adding another component, teaching about cultural variables as they influence student interactions with and perceptions of those with whom they are working (Dunlap, 1998; Sperling, 2007). The expectation of MSL is that because of its interactional style, students will develop a more informed worldview, in which stereotypes are broken down and appreciation for diversity will be fostered (Eyler & Giles, 1997).

MSL is one potentially effective tool for developing multicultural competence. Multicultural competence is generally defined as the development of an individual’s awareness of her cultural identity and belief systems, and the knowledge and skills to work with diverse populations (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). This model, referred to as the tripartite model of multicultural competence, was originally developed in relation to racial and cultural groups in the United States (Sue, 2001). Later versions of the tripartite model have been extended to other diverse identities, promote systemic change, and advocate for a social justice approach (Arredondo et al., 1996). This model is used widely within the field of psychology and has been extended to other fields including education, health, and general undergraduate education (Estrada, Durlak, & Juarez, 2002; Flannery & Ward, 1999; Mayhew & Fernández, 2007; Robinson & Bradley, 1997; Rogers-Sirin & Sirin, 2009).

Aspects of the link between MSL and multicultural competencies have been preliminarily explored (Boyle-Baise, 1998, 2002b; Dunlap, 1998), but a comprehensive look at the process of MSL and development of multicultural competence is lacking in the literature. The current study sought to fill in this gap by qualitatively exploring the influences of MSL on the multicultural competencies of undergraduate recreation and leisure studies students. The guiding research questions for the current study were: (1) How do students think about their own cultural identity and the cultural

identity of those they worked with after participating in MSL projects? and (2) How do MSL experiences shape students understanding and anticipated future behaviors as recreation professionals?

Background

Multicultural competence has been identified as one tool to eliminate disparities through the infusion of multicultural competent principles into the policies and practices of organizations (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d.). According to Pascarella and colleagues (1996) we now better understand how specific programming, such as service-learning, or policy-relevant college experiences increase the value a student places on diversity. As higher education adapts to the changing needs of a diverse society, students must gain multicultural competencies in order to work effectively in increasingly diverse settings. The tripartite model of multicultural competence development includes the development of (1) awareness of one's own cultural background and the cultural background of others, and how those intersect to shape values, beliefs, and biases, (2) knowledge of one's own culture and the cultural background of others, and (3) skills to work effectively with diverse groups (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 1992). Multicultural competence is an intra-and-interpersonal process, often identified as developmental in nature (Arredondo et al., 1996)

In the first stage, individuals are called to develop an awareness of themselves as cultural beings and begin exploring their own biases, values, and assumptions about their culture and the culture of others. Beyond understanding aspects of privilege, individuals must come to understand the various aspects of culture that constitute their identity. Traditionally, a racial and ethnic context has been used to identify individuals. However, the definition of what constitutes a cultural identity has been extended to many diverse identities including age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, or socioeconomic status (American Psychological Association [APA], 2003). Understanding each aspect of one's culture, whether majority or minority, and how that influences values, assumptions about others, biases, and worldview is an integral part to developing multicultural competence (Arredondo et al., 1996).

In the second stage, knowledge, individuals acquire general knowledge about the state of affairs for marginalized groups within the U.S., specific knowledge about various cultural groups, and develop an understanding of the worldviews of others. In their operationalization of the multicultural competencies, Arredondo and colleagues (1996) identified that specifically, one must be aware of the life experiences, cultural heritage, and historical backgrounds of culturally different individuals. When this knowledge is paired with awareness of one's own biases and values, it can serve as a tool to break down stereotypes. For example, a White student tutoring an African American child should not only have the awareness of what it means to be White or Black in the U.S., but also understand that specific child's experiences and family and community context (Sperling, 2007).

The third stage is developing specific skills to work with diverse groups and community contexts. Successful skill development will include employing culturally appropriate intervention strategies that are based on the awareness and knowledge

gained about self, multiculturalism, and specific populations. Kendall (1990) states that MSL experiences should equip students with the skills to move beyond acts of charity and to address systemic social inequities. Examples of such a skill set would be heightened self-confidence and self-esteem, civic-mindedness, increased capacity for empathy, patience, trust, and effective problem solving abilities (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Estrada, 2002).

The literature base related to service-learning is young but growing. What we are beginning to realize, but need to know more about, is how service-learning has a positive effect on student's personal development, leadership and communication skills (Astin & Sax, 1998), is predictive of a career in valuing people and of volunteering (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997), has a positive impact on academic success and the development of critical thinking skills (Eyler & Giles, 1999), has a positive effect on reducing stereotypes and facilitating cultural and racial understanding (Boyle-Baise, 2002a), or may subvert as well as support course goals of reducing stereotyped thinking (Curran, 1999). The later of these discoveries clearly fall within the realm of multicultural service-learning (MSL).

As a whole, multicultural competent individuals will have an understanding of their biases, values, and assumptions that are based on the various cultural identities they hold. They will also have knowledge about the sociopolitical context for cultural minorities in the US and specific groups and persons with whom they are interacting. Finally, they will have skills to work with diverse populations, although what that looks like for undergraduate students is still poorly defined, especially in the field of recreation. Developing multicultural competence is a difficult process that requires self-reflection, interaction with other groups, and reflective processing of those interactions. MSL, which places students in cross-cultural interactions while intentionally focusing on the influence of culture in their interactions, is theoretically a sound methodology for developing multicultural competence in recreation and leisure studies majors. However, the link between MSL, recreation and multicultural competence is still being explored.

Methodology

This study examined the link between MSL and self-reported multicultural competencies in recreation and leisure studies majors, using a participatory action research design. This paradigm is based in the assertion that research should bring about reform or change in the lives of those participating in the study (Creswell, 2007). Specifically for this study, the information produced was useful for the students who participated, in that it informed their practice, allowed them to reflect on their experiences, and provided them with the opportunity to use their voice in the research process (Boyle-Baise 2002b; Reason, 1994).

Reflective writings through qualitative assessment tools were used in the current study to collect information about students' experiences. In qualitative research, reflective writings have been a rich source of data that provides flexibility in the research process (Boyle-Baise, 1998). Because of the participatory action research design, there was a need to protect the identity of student responses. Using reflective writings allowed for depersonalization of students' responses prior to the data analysis process, in which the students were involved. The following sections will address the

detailed procedures of the current study including the context of the study, the sample, data collection, and the data analysis process.

Context and Participants

The program that provided the context for this research is a recreation and leisure studies (RLST) major situated within a Department of Counseling and Human Development services at a southeastern land-grant university. Students enter the major in the fall semester, after completing the statewide liberal arts core curriculum. Within the RLST major, students gain broad knowledge and skills in the areas of administration and management of recreation and leisure services. Programming techniques for people with a range of abilities and work for social justice are emphasized. The process of experiential education and the value of process connected to product are emphasized with a block schedule that links four, three-credit hour courses in the first semester of the major. These courses focus on the foundations of the field, contemporary issues within the field, and community programming. Additionally, there is an emphasis on providing direct service to the community as a way to build skills and broaden the exposure of the students to participants in their local community.

As part of the Community Programming Lab, students are involved in several MSL projects, defined as experiences in which students interact and engage with persons of diverse backgrounds different from their own. For the context of this study, in the fall semester of 2007, prior to any formal data collection, students took part in multicultural preparation exercises, three MSL projects, and continued discussion throughout the semester of cultural variables. Prior to beginning their MSL experiences, students were prepared for MSL through class lectures, discussions, and experiential activities focused on promoting inclusion, increasing awareness of their own cultural background, and facilitating understanding of culturally different persons. Students then took part in three different MSL experiences.

In their first experience, students conducted needs assessments and implemented recreation programs at either a day treatment facility for adults with cognitive disabilities, a community agency that serves children who are predominantly low socioeconomic status and African-American, or at a nursing home that serve older adults who are predominantly low socioeconomic status and African-American. The second experience involved all students working with adults with cognitive disabilities, in which they assisted staff in implementing recreation programs, acting as both partners and teachers of persons with cognitive disabilities. The third experience involved a subset of the students (less than ten), but significantly impacted the experience of those students and the information they learned was shared with the learning community. These particular students investigated the recreation needs of underserved populations. As part of this project, the students conducted interviews and a needs assessment, and then provided recreation equipment and manuals to a community agency that serves Latina/o children with low socioeconomic status. Throughout the semester, prior to, during, and after the MSL experiences, the instructors of the course were intentional about discussing the cultural implications of the students' work with their community participants. Additionally, students continued to process and work through their understanding of their cultural background through continued discussions in classes. Feedback was given to the students throughout their experiences that focused on both

their use of skills learned in their coursework and their ability to work effectively with the diverse group of community members.

The students in this study included 30 undergraduate students within the RLST major. These students were specifically selected for their participation in the RLST core and subsequent participation in a research methods course, in which the data analysis process took place. The current study took place at a predominantly White institution and therefore the sample was limited in diversity. This is reflective of the a majority of MSL research, where students completing MSL projects are typically White, middle to upper class university students interacting with predominantly Black and/or Latino clientele (Sperling, 2007). Our sample consisted of predominantly White, upper class undergraduate students, with a mean age of 23. Fifty-six percent of the sample was female. It should be noted that 53% of the students had previous volunteer experiences; however, only five students indicated that their previous volunteer experiences were in diverse settings.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through demographic questionnaire (age, sex, race, country of origin, ethnicity, year in school, MSL site, and previous volunteer experiences) and reflective qualitative (five prompts intended to facilitate reflection on their MSL experiences) assessment tools. Prompts were developed by the four authors collectively drawing from relevant MSL literature and the authors' previous experiences teaching similar courses to explore the relationship between MSL and students' awareness of their own cultural background, awareness of the cultural background of others, and their anticipated future actions as professionals in the recreation field.

The data-collection process took place approximately two months after students completed their MSL experiences. Steps taken to protect the students included anonymous data collection, asking for minimal demographic identifiers, and transcribing written responses. Additionally, data were reviewed by the third and fourth authors who were not instructors of the course. It should also be noted that demographic information was not attached to student responses to minimize the likelihood of identification. Transcribed responses to the prompts in the reflective qualitative assessment tool were then given to the students for the first phase of data analysis.

Constant comparative analysis, a circular process of analysis that allows the researcher to develop theory that is closely tied to the data, was used to analyze qualitative responses from students and develop themes (Charmaz, 2006). Prior to data analysis, students were trained on how to use constant comparison using lectures and in-class exercises. Data analysis took place in the context of a research methods course and students were guided through the process by the first and second author. To increase the trustworthiness of the data analysis, the authors conducted additional data analysis after the completion of the research methods course. Prior to examining the codes generated by students, each author was assigned one or two data sets (separated by prompt) and coded the corresponding data independently. The purpose of this dual coding was to maintain objectivity, and increase confirmability (Henderson, 2006). The authors then examined the codes from the student researchers and found agreement between the codes identified by the authors and the student researchers.

Findings

This study examined the relationship between MSL and multicultural competence. The results of this study have been divided into two major themes: (1) student beliefs about their multicultural development through MSL, and (2) the MSL process. Within the first theme, most students made statements consistent with changed attitudes and awareness of their culture and the culture of diverse groups. A few students reported no change as a result of their MSL experiences, which within the context and goals of the experience is a negative response. Within the second theme of the MSL process, most students demonstrated an understanding of the process, commenting on how they navigated cognitive dissonance and utilized the connected-collective nature of their learning community to enhance their experience. The findings are presented interwoven with theory that offers depth and insight to the responses.

Theme One: Changed attitudes and cultural awareness

Sue and colleagues (1992) posit that awareness of one's own cultural heritage and the associated values and assumptions about the self and others that follows is the first component of multicultural competence development that often must precede the development of the other two components of multicultural competence, knowledge and skills. Consistent with Sue and colleagues' model, most students reported awareness of their own multicultural background, how their multicultural background influenced their worldview, and how their worldview affects their attitudes towards culturally different persons after participating in MSL.

Awareness of their own culture. Students were asked on the reflective qualitative assessment tool to write about how their MSL experiences affected their awareness of their own culture and the similarities and differences they perceived between themselves and those with whom they worked. Most of the responses that reflected awareness of one's cultural identity focused on nonracial characteristics. Socioeconomic status and education were often cited as differences students noticed between themselves and the participants they worked with. This was most evident in one student's response in relation to working with children in an after school program that serves predominantly African American youth; "Working with the [COMMUNITY AGENCY] opened my eyes towards many surrounding topics. SES and level of education are just a few areas that sparked my thinking about my cultural identity. We were forced to become aware of these issues..." There were a few student responses that were reflective of recognition of race as a part of their cultural identity. For example, a few statements, including "I became very aware that I'm White, something I never think about..." and "I am a middle-class White girl who grew up in the middle of nowhere..." reflected a recognition of Whiteness as a cultural variable. It was not surprising that only few students were able to identify their racial background as a salient factor of their cultural identity, because, as mentioned earlier, Whites hold a privileged position in the US, which makes it easier to ignore aspects of their identity based on race (Helms, 1990).

In addition to recognizing their cultural identity, most students were able to identify privileged positions they held, based on a variety of cultural characteristics, another component of multicultural awareness development (Sue et al., 1992). Similar to the

way students identified their cultural identity; many statements were made indicating privileges that students held based on nonracial characteristics. Identification of privilege based on socioeconomic status and education were the most frequently cited privileges. For example, one student wrote, "...my SES has given me a chance to go to college and learn about social justice. The populations I've worked with may not have a chance to go to college..." indicating that the student recognized that educational attainment is a privilege and that not all persons are given the same opportunities. Another student made a similar statement, "...I am so much a part of the dominant group that I do not see the individuals of oppressed minorities or empathize with their struggles. I realized how much of a privilege I have with education..." recognizing that their lack of recognition of oppressed minorities based on education is an aspect of privilege.

Awareness of one's own culture is one part of the awareness component of multicultural competence (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 1992). Most students did demonstrate an awareness of their cultural identity. However, the recognition of nonracial cultural variables as they contribute to cultural identity and recognition of privilege were more easily identifiable than racial characteristics. This result is often expected based on the privileged position Whites hold in the U.S.

Awareness of attitudes toward others. Increasing awareness regarding one's cultural identity and recognizing how their cultural identity has provided them with certain privileges or disadvantages is an important step in developing multicultural competence (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 1992). Paired with that, one must also work towards understanding how the cultural identity one holds contributes to attitudes towards others. This student's response is indicative of many responses found in the data, stating "...Through my interactions with these individuals, I believe that some of my perceived notions about them changed a great deal...my attitudes have changed for the better..." demonstrating that MSL contributed to an awareness of the attitudes this student held towards others. Many similar statements were made indicating that at a general level, students felt they confronted stereotypes and changed attitudes towards others. Attitudes towards specific groups, an equally important aspect of awareness of others was not evident in the data. This omission may be reflective of early stages in multicultural competence development (Helms, 1990).

Developing awareness of biases and assumptions that one holds based on their cultural identity both generally and towards specific groups is important to becoming culturally competent (Sue et al., 1992). Statements reflecting biases and assumptions towards specific groups were not found, and instead statements denying inherent assumptions about specific groups were found. For example, one student stated "I've always been open minded and it makes me mad when others judge people based on their skin color, but I learned through these projects that some people are usually discriminated against..." While this statement does reflect an acknowledgement of the sociopolitical context for underrepresented populations, there is also an inherent denial of discriminatory beliefs.

Owning one's biases and assumptions is an important step in developing multicultural competence (Sue et al., 1992). Several statements found in the data indicated a lack of awareness or inability to own biases and assumptions that students held. It is possible that this awareness was actually present for students and that political

correctness influenced what students wrote. In the literature, political correctness has been examined. Students in the current study were involved in a participatory action research project in which their peers analyzed their de-identified results. Based on Norton and colleagues' theory (2006) that Whites tend to deemphasize racial characteristics in an attempt to appear to be nonracist, it is possible that political correctness can account for the lack of assumed bias found in the students' results. It is also possible that student responses are reflective of early stages of multicultural competence development.

No change. While many students indicated an understanding of their cultural identity, the privileges they hold, and the biases they held in general or about those that were different from them on nonracial characteristics, a few students indicated that they did not experience any change in their attitudes about self or others and did not develop cultural awareness as a result of their MSL experiences. One student's response was particularly evident of this lack of change, stating, "It didn't affect my cultural identity at all. ...I was exposed to a lot more minority children at once than I'm accustomed to, but as far as my cultural identity, that had no bearing or effect on it." Another student's response, "We were different because of age. Other than that, we were all human..." demonstrated a lack of recognition of differences and is reflective of a lack of multicultural awareness development. There are two potential explanations for these findings. As stated previously, a majority of the sample was White and therefore, a White racial identity model can be helpful for understanding reactions of participants. Another potential explanation is that there can sometimes be resistance to service-learning, especially as it relates to a diverse context (Jones & Abes, 2004).

In addition to awareness, knowledge of various cultural groups and the skills to work with those groups were explored through the qualitative prompts. In general, student responses did not reflect multicultural knowledge or skill attainment as it is described in Sue and colleagues (1992) model. For example, one student stated: "...while this experience has enlightened me... I don't think I would do much differently..." and another student wrote: "I have become more aware and sensitive to some of the needs of individuals who are different from me. I believe that I have become more tolerant as a result of this." These attitudinal changes are reflective of increased awareness and will likely lead to increased knowledge of and skills to work with diverse populations in the future. However, at this time there was not enough evidence to support the belief that students would further their multicultural competence development.

Theme Two: The Multicultural Service-Learning Process

In addition to identifying statements that reflected cultural awareness, many responses reflected an understanding of the process involved in MSL and negative cognitive dissonance.

Understanding the link between multicultural service learning and multicultural competence. MSL has the ability to increase multicultural competence by confronting stereotypes, attitudes, and biases about specific groups and increase awareness, knowledge, and skills related to one's own cultural identity and the cultural identity of others (Astin & Sax, 1998; Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000; Flannery & Ward, 1999; Sperling, 2007). A majority of the students were able to make that connection, identifying ways in which multicultural awareness and competence

can be developed through MSL. For example, one student identified that MSL "... has the chance to broaden someone's cultural awareness because it allows people to venture out their comfort zone." Another student identified that MSL "...provides an opportunity to view cultural similarities and differences." These general statements about multicultural competence development were more easily identifiable than specific methods by which that development occurred.

While general statements about multicultural competence development were more identifiable, a few students did identify that breaking down stereotypes, being exposed to diverse populations, or recognizing privilege as being agents of change for them during their MSL experiences. Regarding recognition of privilege, one student realized "...I am more privileged than most populations I've worked with. ... Recognizing where one is privileged, one can begin to gain an understanding of marginalized populations that lack privilege." These responses identify some students' abilities to identify overt methods of increasing multicultural competence, such as exposure, breaking down stereotypes, and learning to value differences. The statements made by students at both the general and specific level about the relationship between MSL and multicultural competence all had the commonality of navigating cognitive dissonance.

Navigating cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance occurs when two contradictory ideas are introduced calling attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors into question and as a result, requires individuals to change or reject new information to reduce dissonance (Cooper, 2007). In the current study, several students commented on their experience of cognitive dissonance and how it contributed to increased multicultural competence. The process of navigating cognitive dissonance demonstrated in the data began within an initial "...hesitation based on the fact you are entering a community you are not a part of." Upon entering their MSL experiences, students reported experiencing stress and dissonance related to new information gathered and learning "...about the differences between... [and the] similarities you have" with the population. Students identified that this process led to "changes in cultural awareness."

The role that dissonance plays in reducing stereotypes and negative attitudes about marginalized populations is documented (Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1994) and demonstrates that dissonance leads to either rejection of new information in an effort to prevent damage to self-identity or attitudinal change. Students demonstrated a similar pattern, as the one found by Leippe and Eisenstadt (1994) in that a majority of the students reported changed attitudes towards marginalized populations, but some actively rejected the new information, choosing to maintain less multicultural competent attitudes.

Related to cognitive dissonance, one unique finding was how students dealt with dissonance. Some students reported that they responded to discomfort by asking faculty to "Make sure [students] know how to speak and act towards any and all [Community Group]..." Overall, students made statements that indicated increased levels of awareness about their cultural identity and the identity of the participants they worked with, demonstrating that they navigated cognitive dissonance, resulting in attitude changes. Student success may be attributed to the fact that they shared experiences and helped each other (and help from faculty) move through the process and address the cognitive dissonance.

Conclusion

MSL is a reciprocal process of providing service and focusing on learning how cultural variables impact the service-learning process (Boyle-Baise, 2002a). The findings from this study suggest that a majority of the students developed an awareness of some of their own cultural variables and cultural variables of others. In addition to supporting existing literature, the responses demonstrated an understanding of the process MSL and its link to multicultural competence. Students demonstrated an understanding of the process of MSL, an understanding of the role cognitive dissonance plays in breaking down stereotypes and developing multicultural competence, and shared experiences that contributed to their understanding of the process.

Limitations of the current study include: (1) that the process was explored reflectively, rather than during the process and (2) that only one method of data collection was used (reflective questionnaires). Future research studies should explore the process of multicultural competence development throughout the process of MSL, aiming to understand various individual experiences, thoughts, and feelings before, throughout, and after MSL experiences. Future studies should also utilize multiple sources of data to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth view of this process. Mixed methods research, examining the outcome and process variables, or exploratory qualitative studies that use observation, artifacts, and interviews with students would both be helpful in this exploration.

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