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Shifting Language from Multicultural Competence to Consciousness

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The United States and its institutions of higher education are becoming increasingly diverse. As a result, developing multiculturally competent citizens is at the forefront of the espoused mission of higher education (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), 2012; Rogers, 2003). Institutions of higher education often highlight multicultural competence as a key component of their goals and mission statements. The earliest discussion of multicultural competence, however, did not originate within higher education but rather within the field of psychology. Beginning in the 1950s, many counselors began identifying and exploring the importance of understanding multicultural clientele (Heine, 1950; Jackson, 1995; Rogers, 1957). By the 1970s and 1980s, a movement emerged within the field of psychology (Carter, 2009; Jackson, 1995) centered on increasing research on the awareness, knowledge, and skills counselors needed to be effective when working with diverse clients (Sue & Sue, 1971) and thus the construct of multicultural competence emerged. The term competence, however, implies an arrival or actualization of a skill. Not only is multicultural competence a complex and difficult construct to measure, the term itself does not allow for or encourage continuous ongoing growth.

Defining terms is important and language selection is critical in this process. Although the term *multicultural competence* is more widely accepted in higher education and student affairs, I argue the term *consciousness* is more applicable to understanding this concept as the term allows for a continued ongoing process of learning and development (Dean, 2017). In this piece, I discuss the history and origins of multicultural competence in the field of student affairs, as well as my rationale for why I believe *multicultural consciousness* is more appropriate.

Realizing some would argue semantics, I do believe this distinction is important. Words hold meaning and the development within these areas is a critical component and the continued responsibility of each of us. There is no destination, but rather a continuous journey to better understand ourselves and others.

History of Multicultural Competence

To understand the current definitions of multicultural competence and the desire to shift the language to multicultural consciousness, it is important to know a brief history of the multicultural counseling movement. This movement deeply impacts the ways student affairs and higher education understands the concept of multicultural competence.

The 1950s marked the beginning of multicultural counseling in the United States. During this period, a few articles (Heine, 1950; Rogers, 1957) explored the role of culture within a counseling context and expressed the importance of understanding cultural context as part of the counseling process (Carter, 2009; Jackson, 1995). Murphy (1955), one of the first to publish on multicultural counseling, suggested that cultural knowledge of clients was extremely important in being an effective counselor. These articles (Heine, 1950; Murphy, 1955; Rogers, 1957) initiated a conversation about the need to understand culturally diverse clients (Murphy, 1955). However, not until decades later would the multicultural movement begin to impact the entire profession.

The 1960s were an era of change and growth for the counseling profession, and it was in this decade that the profession began paying more attention to the issues and concerns of People of Color (Jackson, 1995). The Civil Rights

Act of 1964 reinforced the need for counselors to discuss and recognize how race, discrimination, and prejudice affect an individual and the counseling relationship. Moreover, the profession began to realize the importance of fostering multiculturally competent counselors.

Building upon the contributions of the 1960s that advanced the multicultural movement, the 1970s brought increased research and further development of multicultural counseling issues (Sue & Sue, 1971). Journals in the field began to examine specific concerns and needs of underrepresented groups that were not being met by the counseling profession (Jackson, 1995; Pedersen, 1987). But it was a panel discussion on cross-cultural counseling at the 1973 American Psychological Association conference that recommended the inclusion of multicultural diversity training and continuing education; this panel discussion is credited with propelling the multicultural counseling movement (Jackson, 1995; Korman, 1974).

The 1980s and 1990s brought unprecedented growth in research on multicultural counseling, as the profession began to recognize the importance of understanding culturally diverse clients. At the same time, researchers began developing instruments to measure counselors' levels of multicultural competence in working with clients (Sue et al., 1982). The multicultural counseling competency became, and continues to be, the basis for research and training within the counseling profession (Ponterotto, 2008). As the U.S. population continued to grow more diverse, the counseling profession was heavily influenced by and responsive to the changes. Other professions (e.g., health care, higher education) also followed suit, adapting to the needs of previously marginalized populations and examining their ability to be multiculturally sensitive (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2019; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992).

Origins of Multicultural Competence Definitions

Over the last four decades, the number of studies has increased rapidly around understanding professionals' multicultural competence (Gamst, Liang, & Der-Karabetian, 2011; Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2019). Yet there is still no universally accepted definition of the term *multiculturalism* (Adams, 2007). Nevertheless, higher education professionals recognize the need to develop multiculturally sensitive and competent individuals.

The first and most influential model to measure multicultural competence was the CrossCultural Competency Model (Sue et al., 1982). The model identified 11 competencies across three factors: (a) beliefs/attitudes, (b) knowledge, and (c) skills (Sue et al., 1982). Although the model incorporated additional competencies over time, these three overarching factors remained. Sue et al. (1982) defined these factors as (a) the need for individuals to be aware of personal biases in relationship to racial, ethnic, and sociopolitical identity (cultural beliefs/attitudes); (b) the knowledge of clients' ethnic/racial group, social class, and barriers to success; and (c) the communication and intervention skills (cultural skills) necessary to provide services for diverse clients (Sue et al., 1982; Sue & Sue, 1990). Since its introduction, other researchers have developed multicultural competency models based on its conceptualizations and definitions, many of which follow its tripartite design. These subsequent definitions include personal characteristic models, skills or tactics models, process-oriented models, and cultural competence instruments (Gamst, Liang, & Der-Karabetian, 2011).

Although student affairs has long upheld a commitment to understanding diverse students, Pope and Reynolds (1997) recognized the increased attention to multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills as a competency of the profession. They adapted a definition from counseling and revised it to assess the multicultural competence of student affairs professionals. The Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs-Preliminary 2 Scale (Pope & Mueller, 2000) was validated and revised in an attempt to capture the specificities of multicultural competency from a student affairs perspective. Although many scholars respect the instrument for its validity and reliability, others have criticized the theory of multicultural competence for its heavy reliance on attitudes in determining competence (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Landerman, 2003).

In both counseling and student affairs scholarship, competence is still defined by three constructs: awareness, knowledge, and skills (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2019). However, while skills represent an expected demonstration of proficiency in actualizing individuals' awareness and knowledge, skills do not adequately capture the intended ongoing process of development.

The Argument for Multicultural Consciousness

Some researchers have urged that instead of assessing awareness, knowledge, and skills, instruments should measure the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of working with those who are culturally different from oneself (Kegan, 1994; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). They argue that in intergroup dialogue, individuals must understand themselves (awareness and knowledge) before they can understand others and comprehend societal stratification (Maxwell, Fisher, Thompson, & Behling, 2011). Thus, multiculturally competent individuals must possess an awareness of themselves, a knowledge of difference, and an understanding of societal inequities.

Along the same lines, Freire (2010) advocated the need for critical consciousness to understand the world's political and social contradictions as a spur to action that overthrows oppression. Critical consciousness requires newly interpreting the world and fostering a reorientation of one's perspective toward social justice (Freire, 2010). Critical consciousness is viewed as an ongoing process of development with a goal of creating a more democratic and just society (Freire, 2010; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

Some researchers and scholars have advocated a shift in language to articulate and measure the goal of multicultural competence more accurately (Dean, 2017; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Landerman, 2003). Achieving consciousness implies reaching an understanding of self (intrapersonal) while interacting with others (interpersonal). Landerman (2003) explains:

> Definitions of "competence" are theoretically and empirically inconsistent, and do not address the application of one's understanding and skills to intergroup relationships or social justice issues; the heterogeneity of cultural groups, the multiplicity, complexity, and intersectionality of identity, and individuals' relationship to institutional and society power and their social location have been minimally considered . . . as well as the influences these factors have on the individual's experiences, perspectives,

> and presenting problems; absent from the competence literature are considerations concerning students' underlying assumptions about intergroup differences. (p. 39)

Shifting from multicultural competence to consciousness also incorporates cultural humility as an idea for understanding and better applying these constructs. Cultural humility is a process-oriented approach that maintains an individual (particularly in helping professions) should be other-oriented (open to others and differences) regarding multicultural identities that are important to the person (Hood, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013). Cultural humility consists of three factors: commitment to lifelong self-evaluation, desire to fix power imbalances, and advocacy for others (Trevalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). These three factors play an important role in understanding oneself and others and contribute to multicultural consciousness. Cultural humility helps bridge between competence and consciousness in that it allows for ongoing development while also encouraging action.

Multicultural Consciousness Definition

The discourse around multicultural competence has consistently influenced our work in higher education. Thus, the desire to shift language may be challenging. In an effort to move from competence toward consciousness, it is important to examine the proposed construct to determine if consciousness is indeed the avenue for pursuit. The greatest difference between consciousness and competence lies in the construct and application of skill development. I propose slight shifts in language are also needed to more accurately represent awareness and knowledge.

Awareness should emphasize an understanding of oneself or intrapersonal awareness. Given that focus on intrapersonal awareness, *awareness of self* is more descriptive, instead of the more broadly defined construct of awareness. Additionally, defining knowledge more narrowly as *knowledge of difference,* focuses more on a cognitive understanding of differences.

Where competence and consciousness differ most significantly is in the constructs of skill and interpersonal disposition. *Skill* refers to the acquisition or attainment of the ability to effectively interact with others. *Interpersonal disposition* refers to one's attitudes and beliefs about interacting with others who are different from oneself. Interpersonal disposition is a necessary component of the skill construct; however, interpersonal disposition does not imply that an individual actually associates or interacts with those who are different. Because interpersonal relationships are important in developing skills, the construct of interpersonal disposition still fits within the theoretical framework of awareness, knowledge, and skills. However, interpersonal disposition is more applicable to the notion of *consciousness* than to competence as a step toward the development of the skill to effectively interact with others (Dean, 2017). The following definitions outline multicultural consciousness.

1. *Awareness of self:* acknowledgement and appreciation of one's own cultural heritage and how that influences biases, values, beliefs, and emotional responses to culturally different populations; recognition of one's own limitations regarding competence (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kegan, 1994; Marcia, 1966; Reynolds, 2001)

2. *Knowledge of difference*: acknowledgement of diverse beliefs and values, having specific knowledge about others' cultural heritage and sociopolitical contexts, and familiarity with specific populations (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994; King & Kitchner, 1994; Perry 1968/1999)
3. *Interpersonal disposition*: willingness to interact with diverse others, develop relationships in which multiple perspectives exist, sustain intergroup friendships, and embrace multiple sources of identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; Johnson, 2001; Kappler, 1998; Kegan, 1994; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Nagda & Maxwell, 2011)

Conclusion

Defining terms is an important, yet difficult task in conceptualizing a definition such as multicultural consciousness, and language selection is critical in this process. Language is particularly important as a profession and as individuals we strive to advocate for more inclusive language and not language or ideas that replicate the power dynamics we seek to dismantle. In operationalizing a definition of multicultural consciousness, there is a risk of perpetuating power and privilege instead of enacting social justice. Thus, in deliberating new terms, it is important that adoption be considered through a framework of social justice. Although the term *multicultural competence* is more widely accepted in higher education and student affairs lexicon, in order to determine individuals' levels of understanding of themselves, others, and difference itself, I argue the term *consciousness* is more dynamic and allows for a continued ongoing process of learning and development (Dean, 2017).

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