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Privilege and Oppression in Counselor Education: An Intersectionality Framework

Christian D. Chan, Deanna N. Cor, and Monica P. Band

Multiculturalism and social justice are considered major forces in the counseling profession, revolutionizing the complexity of social identity, cultural identity, and diversity. Although these major forces have influenced the profession, many challenges exist with their implementation within counselor education curriculum and pedagogy. A major challenge is the complex dynamics of privilege and oppression that both counselor educators and counseling students face. This article discusses the use of intersectionality to approach counselor education pedagogy and practice.

Keywords: counselor education, intersectionality, multicultural counseling, social justice, pedagogy

The counseling profession is oriented toward approaches that are rooted in humanistic practice, strengths-based perspectives, professionalism, and respect for diversity (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014; Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). Because of this, the counseling of diverse populations, multicultural counseling, and multicultural supervision operate as major developmental movements within the counseling profession (Comas-Diaz, 2012; Sue & Sue, 2016). While these ideological movements continue to advance the profession, an additional movement on social justice has been
integrated into both the competencies and orientation of the profession (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010; Singh et al., 2010). In the linkage between these two movements (Ratts, 2011), multiculturalism and social justice have often been regarded, respectively, as the fourth (Sue & Sue, 2016) and fifth (Ratts, 2009, 2011; Ratts & Pedersen, 2014; Singh et al., 2010) forces in counseling. Several documents provide guidelines to implement values inherently tied to issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice, including the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016); the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) Competencies for Counseling With Transgender Clients (ALGBTIC, 2009); the ALGBTIC Competencies for Counseling With Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Ally Individuals (Harper et al., 2012), and the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (2009) Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling. Consequently, the most recent ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014) has both integrated and emphasized the competencies and responsibilities of all counselors to uphold significant values of multicultural counseling and social justice initiatives.

With the advent of the new ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014) and new standards of the major accrediting body for counseling programs (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2015), multiple standards communicate that constructs from multiculturalism and social justice are continuously integrated into the curriculum and pedagogy within counseling and counselor education graduate programs at both the master’s and the doctoral level. However, there are several challenges to consider when developing these competencies within graduate counseling students. Each student differs on developmental level, engagement with the course material, experiences of culture, salient cultural identities, and the interpretation of both the multicultural counseling and social justice competencies. Because of these influencing characteristics within each individual, predicting the success and pathway of imparting the competencies to students is largely difficult.

**Positionality of the Authors**

In developing the conceptual framework on intersectionality in counselor education, our own identities intersect in a complex way that provides connections to both privilege and oppression, influencing the manner in which we share these perspectives as counselor educators. The first author identifies as a second-generation, queer, Asian American cisgender male. In addition, he identifies as able-bodied and a pluralistic Catholic. Although he is a child of two immigrants, he also takes on many perspectives from socialization in a middle-class background. The second author identifies as a White, cisgender female. She also identifies as gay and married. The third author identifies as a biracial, heterosexual woman who was raised Catholic with Jewish and
Chinese heritage. Notably, our social and cultural identities as authors and counselor educators formulate a basis for the complexities relevant for applications from intersectionality theory, considering the coexisting nature of privilege and oppression. Given power differentials and instrumental roles as counselor educators, our own intersecting identities create multiple dimensions to investigate (a) classroom and institutional context and politics, (b) pedagogy and curriculum, (c) power, and (d) social location. More important, we emphasize critical reflexivity to consciously interrogate the coexisting forms of privilege and oppression represented across shifting and diverse contexts, classrooms, and institutions.

Prior gaps

Prior research, especially in multiculturalism, has often faced the challenge of situating culture within a monocultural lens focusing singularly on one group or one set of identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, affectional identity, social class). Consequently, much research has developed a strong foundation for each group, but the research base has not necessarily moved beyond a single focus to examine the complex interaction and intersection of identity development across multiple identities (Bowleg, 2008, 2012, 2013; Bowleg & Bauer, 2016; Shields, 2008; Warner, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013).

Our contention is that when individuals identify with multiple cultural groups and identities, the potential to experience both privilege and oppression may be much greater. For example, a person could experience privilege as part of a majority group (e.g., White privilege) while experiencing oppression as a member of a minority group (e.g., identifying as queer). In enhancing counselor education pedagogy, one key challenge is exploring how individuals might arrive at identifying with the multicultural counseling and social justice competencies when they potentially experience both privilege and oppression simultaneously.

Although some researchers have written conceptual frameworks about the various forms of privilege (Black & Stone, 2005; Israel, 2012; Liu, Pickett, & Ivey, 2007; Smith & Shin, 2008), the topic continues to emerge in the social justice movement within counseling. The various forms of privilege and their counterparts in oppressive experiences are explicit in their conceptualization. However, there is a paucity of research about the reactions, understanding, and conceptualization of privilege and oppression (Pastrana, 2010; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2017; Yoon, Jérémie-Brink, & Kordesh, 2014). Some studies have attempted to investigate those constructs within counseling students, although those studies require an extended body of empirical evidence to supplement current understanding on the complexities of intersecting privilege and oppression. Many studies have focused extensively on either White privilege or privilege in counseling relationships between counselors and clients (Ancis & Szynanski, 2001; Hays, Chang, & Dean, 2004; Malott, Havlik, Palacios, & Contrisciane Lewis, 2014; Paone, Malott, & Barr, 2015;
Rothman, Malott, & Paone, 2012). Hillock (2012) found that social work students did not have the language to approach meaningful awareness of privilege and oppression and how this understanding would have an impact on their clients. Estrada, Poulsen, Cannon, and Wiggins (2013) provided extensive results on bridging discussions of privilege and oppression early in their counseling students’ graduate programs through orientation activities. Although their results demonstrated positive evaluations from students, the processes of how individuals understood privilege and oppression were largely absent from the study. Hays, Dean, and Chang (2007) undertook a qualitative analysis in searching for themes of understanding privilege and oppression and the subsequent impact on the counseling process. In their study, meaningful themes were identified with regard to how privilege and oppression affect the counseling process and especially how those topics arise within their training and course work. However, considering the timing and location of their study (an institution in the southeastern United States), Hays and colleagues recommended that qualitative data and research on this topic be extended beyond the scope of their investigation.

**intersectionality as framework**

Intersectionality theory applications are interdisciplinary (Bowleg, 2008, 2012; Warner, 2008) with evidence in law, sociology, psychology, counseling, and education. In one perspective, the conceptualization of intersectionality addresses multiple cultural identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual identity, ability, social class, spirituality). Other perspectives emphasize the notion that cultural identity is difficult to conceptualize beyond just one set of values tied to one identity. Two or more cultural identities are difficult to be treated as separate constructs, considering their relationship with each other (e.g., race and gender) and the process of identity development that occurs in tandem (Cole, 2008, 2009). The resulting product may be evidence of conflicting disparities within groups and an extension of biased thinking.

An additional perspective of intersectionality theory is its address of social inequalities that are perpetuated by institutional oppression (Shields, 2008; Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012). To address the inequalities tied politically to institutions, intersectionality theory focuses on moving beyond a microlevel perspective to a macrolevel perspective (Carastathis, 2016; Cho, 2013; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). The theory also posits that instituting change is possible by addressing problems that are inherent in political structures (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). Warner (2008) supported this notion by explaining that individuals’ identities are informed by the social context and structures influencing them. Consequently, individuals’ identity development is largely influenced by their context, which can also influence their understanding of privilege and oppression.

According to Warner (2008), context affects how individuals view themselves in light of the political structure. When a marginalized group is affected by that political structure, its group members derive experiences influenced by
that structure, demonstrating their differences from the privileged groups in the society. As a result, their identities may become much more salient in demonstrating how these marginalized individuals are affected by the context. Major components of intersectionality encourage researchers to move beyond simplistic silos of cultural identities to explore interconnecting identity processes that can create social change (Cole, 2008, 2009; Corlett & Mavin, 2014; May, 2014).

**HISTORICAL INFLUENCES**

Intersectionality’s history originates from an extended history of social justice and human rights movements that were intended to fight marginalization and oppression (Bilge, 2013; Bowleg, 2008, 2012, 2013; Carbado et al., 2013; Cho, 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Its history noticeably converges on two specific theoretical junctures, specifically Black feminism and critical race theory (Carbado et al., 2013). Although intersectionality has visibly expanded to multiple disciplines and applications to multiple identities, the lack of historical context overlooks the philosophical underpinnings at the heart of the theoretical framework and perpetuates a secondhand interpretation that misconstrues key tenets (Bilge, 2013; May, 2014). Namely, intersectionality emerged from the works of Crenshaw (1988, 1989, 1991) and Collins (1986, 1990, 2004), who revolutionized feminism in their own respective disciplines of legal and sociological scholarship. Crenshaw (1989) critiqued the problematic forms of oppression and advocacy within the feminist movement, citing that movements that are intended to disentangle multiple overlapping forms of oppression cannot subsist on a “single-axis analysis” (p. 139). Similarly, Collins (1986) explicated the problematic “interlocking nature of oppression” (p. S14) that adds to the complexity of women of color present in social structures. While utilizing their own narratives to deconstruct the problems undergirding social justice movements, both scholars’ seminal contributions are heavily tied to the predecessors of other women of color and queer women of color radically employing their narratives to combat social injustices (Anzaldúa, 1987; hooks, 1981, 1984, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). These predecessors’ contributions revolutionized intersectionality and the feminist movement by generating counternarratives to systemically counteract multiple overlapping forms of oppression sustained within a network of dominant social structures.

**PRIMARY TENETS**

Since the expansion of intersectionality from numerous predecessors mapping its movement (Carbado et al., 2013), the theoretical framework has evolved to meet applicability across research, practice, policy, and pedagogy (Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Hancock, 2007). Collins and Bilge (2016) synthesized the core tenets of intersectionality in six themes: power, complexity, social inequality, social context, social justice, and relationality. Concomitantly, intersectionality thrives on the antiessentialist viewpoint by disentangling the diversity between and within identity categories (Smooth, 2013). Smooth (2013) recognized
that intersectionality embodies intersecting and mutually linked identities as opposed to mutually exclusive, flattened identity categories. Additionally, mutually linked categories are interconnected to systems of power shaped by both contextual and temporal claims (Carastathis, 2016; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Smooth, 2013). Smooth also postulated that privilege and oppression can coexist because of the complexities inherent in multiple identities linked to the stratified system of power relations.

challenges in multiculturalism in counselor education

Many graduate-level counseling and training programs require multicultural course work, yet the issues of power, privilege, oppression, and social justice may not be integrated across the curriculum (Motulsky, Gere, Saleem, & Trantham, 2014). Counselor educators who instruct courses related to multicultural issues are called to continually define their own awareness and identities to ensure they have adequate knowledge and confront a variety of challenges. Despite best intentions, gaps remain in the continuity of ethical decision making and how to determine the most effective type of multicultural training and education. Challenges may arise in the classroom in response to the layers and interactions of interpersonal and group dynamics. For instance, initial awareness, depth of understanding, receptivity toward multicultural processes, degrees of engagement, and progression are variable to each student. Moreover, challenges may emerge as course content is delivered and as curriculum is developed or in response to the learning environment (Fier & Ramsey, 2005; Reynolds, 2011). Approaches to curriculum development of multicultural content may differ across various professional disciplines; however, even when standards for course content exist, instructors’ teaching methods may vary drastically. The counselor educator’s skill level and identity development are likely to have an impact on all levels of the educational process.

According to Fier and Ramsey (2005), a significant component to providing effective multicultural services is continued training and education on ethics. Protecting the welfare of students is the ethical obligation of the instructor, and this is largely dependent on the instructor’s level of competency and awareness. Multicultural education is designed to be a collaborative and transformative process that challenges and changes the student’s existing perceptions of self-concept. The collaborative nature of multicultural course work requires the instructor and student to acknowledge a power differential within the traditional educational roles. Consequently, instructors and students work to redefine this power differential in a way that diminishes the hierarchy (Fier & Ramsey, 2005).

There is a degree of psychological risk within a counselor education classroom simply because of the nature of the topic. Potential threats to the welfare of students include the instructor’s use of disclosure and related relationship boundary issues (Buckley & Foldy, 2010). Self-disclosure by the instructor may increase relationship conflicts because it may influence feelings of connection.
or distance between the instructor and the student. For example, students whose cultural background is different from the instructor’s may respond negatively, increase distance, and develop countertransference. The students may also experience these disclosures as invalidating their own cultural experiences, especially if the disclosures contradict or minimize their experience of inclusion, privilege, or oppression (Fier & Ramsey, 2005; Yoon et al., 2014).

**complexity of privilege and oppression**

To fully explore identity, one must examine the intersection of privilege and oppression. Students in counseling programs hold a variety of salient identities, including race and ethnicity, gender identity, sex, affectional and sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic status, social class, and religious/spiritual identity. Individuals can be members of both oppressive and oppressed groups. Consequently, both the benefits of privilege and the negative impact of oppression can be experienced simultaneously (Hays & Chang, 2003). Frequently in counseling training programs, educators include multiple identities when conceptualizing clients, but they often position social and cultural identities in a mutually exclusive manner or fail to highlight their intersections (Davis, 2014). Counselor educators supplement a variety of representations with these multiple social identities in the context of the classroom but place singular emphasis on identity, which obscures particular intersections and increases salience of prescriptive practices (Yoon et al., 2014).

**CHALLENGES TO ADDRESSING PRIVILEGE**

Discussions around privilege in an academic setting can often stimulate a range of emotional reactions in students. For example, with regard to White privilege, White students may experience feelings of guilt, anxiety, and shame, leading to a resistance to acknowledging one’s privilege as well as to defensiveness, which can be detrimental to developing multicultural counseling competencies (Davis, 2014; Yoon et al., 2014).

Faculty members are not immune to these reactions. There can be various reasons why faculty members are hesitant to explore the issue of privilege with students. Personal social identities of counselor educators carry several triggers for students holding a privileged identity (Yoon et al., 2014). Sue and Constantine’s (2007) study on psychology and education programs found that White professors were worried that talking about privilege would create tension between them and their students, and they might lose control of the class and feel helpless to recognize or facilitate dialogues on race. In addition, faculty members’ careers may be influenced by negative student evaluations based on the emotion-laden topics of White privilege and racism, which ultimately may be the reason why faculty avoid such discussions (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009).
OPPRESSIVE EXPERIENCES

Because students are grounded in multiple contextual and systemic layers of educational institutions (e.g., colleges, universities), systematically exploring oppression as a facet of power relations between students’ identities and the social structures of institutions remains essential. Individuals who hold oppressed identities may experience discrimination, which may affect their self-esteem and lead to depression and anxiety. For example, individuals holding a sexual or gender minority identity experience higher rates of harassment and fewer legal protections, which can lead to symptoms of posttraumatic stress (Szymanski, 2011). Research has highlighted the detrimental ways experiences of discrimination have had a negative impact on psychological health. Krieger, Kosheleva, Waterman, Chen, and Koenen (2011) found a significant correlation between experiences of racial discrimination and psychological distress among both U.S.-born and foreign-born participants who are Black. These findings validate the need to consider the experiences of students who hold identities that are oppressed.

INTERSECTION OF PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION

Davis (2014) examined the intersection of privileged and oppressed identities among White lesbian counseling trainees. She argued that exploring and understanding White privilege in the context of racial identity development allow the counseling trainees to recognize the effect their acknowledged or unacknowledged privilege will have on their work with clients. Davis noted that a White lesbian trainee has the benefit of intimately understanding the experience of institutionalized, relational, and internalized oppression. Examining the crossroads of counseling trainees’ identities can develop and foster cultural empathy that parallels their relationships with members of communities they serve (Cundiff, Nadler, & Swan, 2009; Garcia, Lu, & Maurer, 2012; Kirmayer, 2013; Pedersen, 2008, 2009; Pedersen & Pope, 2010; Suthakaran, 2011).

future directions for counselor education

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality can play a major role in developing multicultural frameworks within the counselor education curriculum. Using this theoretical lens challenges individuals to search beyond interpersonal interactions to form knowledge of social inequalities connected to institutions. In the context of counselor education, this perspective is meaningful because it provides a lens for how counselor educators can change patterns of institutional oppression for their students. Furthermore, the lens can provide
a catalyst for counselor educators to challenge students to work against social inequalities that have an impact on their clients. In addressing experiences of privilege and oppression, counselor educators can assist students in comprehending their own privilege by attending to systemic issues of power relations that often guide cultural and political implications for marginalized groups. Augmenting the implications of a systems approach, especially Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1994) ecological systems model, can mitigate the defensiveness emanating within the classroom (Yoon et al., 2014) and promote cultural empathy (Davis, 2014). Counselor educators can communicate that students may not necessarily have chosen to actively create the privilege or discriminate other groups, but that the systems and context create those privileges for particular individuals, which subsequently become a sociopolitical force that affects the relationships, services, and advocacy that counselors provide their clients.

Intersectionality also provides a pathway for counselor educators to enhance their students’ critical thinking skills about multiculturalism. Although each cultural group has a significant set of values and belief systems, intersectionality necessitates an analysis on the linkages among mutually constitutive identities as opposed to exclusively examining identities as silos. For example, an individual’s sexual or gender identity may have an impact on her or his placement in an ethnic group (e.g., queer person of color). A bisexual, cisgender, Latinx male may experience discriminatory events within multiple communities purported to provide access, connections, opportunity, and community. This individual may experience discrimination within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender expansive, queer, and questioning (LGBTGEQ+; Goodrich et al., 2017) communities as a racial and ethnic minority while simultaneously facing discrimination within Latinx communities as a bisexual cisgender male. Latinx is the identifier utilized to reference race inclusive of sexuality, affectional identity, and gender identity, but more important, it is a racial construction of inclusivity for gender in the scope of multiple genders (e.g., cisgender, transgender, genderqueer, nonbinary, gender nonconforming; Pastrana, Battle, & Harris, 2017). When counselor educators deliver this approach of intersectionality to their students, there is a strong potential for students to see beyond prescriptive methods of counseling that address a limited set of values. Beyond addressing multicultural knowledge and skills, counselor educators can provide a more multidimensional conceptualization for counseling students to use when comprehending cultural identity through an intersectional lens. In addition, counselor educators can provide opportunities for students to reflect on the complexity of social and cultural identity. When this complexity is introduced, the connections to privilege and oppression do not lie within only one identity; rather, the duality of privilege and oppression extends to several identities. For some students, recognizing oppression and marginalization can be derived from their own oppressed identities while contending with the bias emerging from privileged identities.
PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES FOR CONSIDERATION

A valuable process for counselor educators is to engage in their own critical self-awareness. In this process of reflection, counselor educators think critically about the biases that they perpetuate. Furthermore, they explicate how their privileges have limited their own viewpoints within the classroom. Addressing these biases can formulate knowledge of how to enhance classroom practices to meet the needs of diverse students while also owning the discomfort in the classroom.

In addition, there is a significant power differential between educators and students. Realizing this power differential can alert counselor educators to how their perspectives affect the students’ formation and motivation to engage with multicultural counseling and social justice. Counselor educators represent models and points of socialization for their students. When counseling students experience negative interactions within the classroom, these issues may also arise within the students’ counseling practices with clients, which raise caution for ethical practices with clients.

Instructors of multicultural courses should allot sufficient time for students to effectively debrief from exercises and assignments that may be experienced as uncomfortable. Some exercises may trigger self-awareness among students, and they may need time to process these experiences. Other students may find certain exercises uncomfortable or insensitive to a particular cultural group. A new awareness of previously unrealized bias may negatively affect a student’s self-concept and perception of others. Processing uncomfortable experiences, challenging preconceived biases, and taking risks are necessary components of personal growth. However, the instructor’s responsibility is to minimize the likelihood that risks will harm the well-being of students. The instructor must also assess the students who are unwilling or unable to take risks and evaluate their readiness for the field.

To embody an intersectional framework, particularly in multicultural and social justice courses, instructors can adopt key questions that assist counseling students to critically analyze their identities and intersections. Counselor educators can present some questions as part of their course discussions, especially if courses involve a monocultural format, for example, a single class meeting focused on counseling practices with Asian Americans. Monocultural formats frequently focus on one cultural group or identity to generate dialogue and application within counseling courses (Hartung, 1996; Shen, 2015; Sue, 2001), which can reinforce hegemony through the gaze of a dominant group. The resulting problematic discourse from using monocultural formats within multicultural and social justice integration in counselor education can institutionalize unilateral and prescriptive thinking toward practices with clients and students, as well as diminish the applicability for understanding marginalized students in a counselor education classroom in conjunction with enhanced practices to serve marginalized clients and students (Haskins & Singh, 2015; Odegard & Vereen, 2010). Conversely, counselor educators
can integrate the following questions as part of group work pedagogy to raise consciousness around social, political, and cultural issues concurrent with the classroom, student experiences, counselor educator experiences, and events outside the classroom. Counselor educators can model prompts with the following example language to students:

- Reflect on the community we have been discussing in class today. What other identities may change or shape experiences in this community differently?
- Think about one identity that is most prominent to you (e.g., ethnicity). How has another identity (e.g., social class) influenced your experiences with ethnicity?
- Expanding on the connection between two identities (e.g., ethnicity and social class), how has this connection changed over time in your family? Community? Growing up?
- Reflect on an identity that you share with a client (e.g., race, ethnicity). If you share this identity with your client, how might one of your other identities (e.g., sexuality, affectional identity) expand your power and privilege over your client?
- What are the histories associated with your identities? How have these histories influenced how you are seen within society? Please also reflect in terms of identities that link together (e.g., women of color, queer people of color, racial/ethnic minority, and differently-abled).

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH**

Utilizing intersectionality as a lens is one approach to develop further practices and research in counselor education. Because of the paucity of research using intersectionality in counselor education, its presence is a necessary component to provide a different perspective to enhance counselor education practices and research. Using theoretical components from intersectionality literature can elicit more developed critical thinking beyond the research that is conducted with separate classifications of groups. In addition, these components can create pathways for researchers to think about the various forms of oppression that exist for marginalized groups.

In the context of counselor education, research on pedagogical approaches and supervisory practices with marginalized students can use intersectionality theory to derive critical thinking about how the research is conducted with the influence of multiple identities. Intersectional scholarship can target the core tenets of intersectionality by using its key principles, thus illuminating a cohesive paradigm (Cho et al., 2013). Notably, the complexity of intersectionality and its navigation of multiple, mutually constitutive identities raise challenges in conducting research that visibly unearths intersectional experiences. Warner (2008) argued that investigating two mutually linked identities hones in on the
focus among the identities of interest, but allows for emergent interactions or findings external of the two mutually linked identities of interest. For example, scholars could build a research study on race and sexuality, in which social class and spirituality could emerge as other salient and relevant identities in the data and findings. Bowleg and Bauer (2016) contended that intersectional scholarship would not refer closely to intersectionality without integrating social context and power. Multiple researchers (e.g., Bowleg, 2008; Corlett & Mavin, 2014) observed that intersectionality can attune to its core tenets through an intersectional or interactionist approach rather than the extensive amount of scholarship utilizing an additive or multiplicative approach. With these perspectives, counselor educators will have another lens to develop enhanced practices and innovative research ideas.

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