

# Assessing and Promoting Cultural Relativism in Students of Counseling

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**Abstract** Multicultural counseling is often promoted as a core element in counselor development. As such, educational efforts aim to increase counselors' cultural relativism, or their ability to recognize their own enculturation and to appreciate the value of other cultural norms. This mixed qualitative-quantitative study explored the relationship between counselor and human service professional trainees' moral development levels and their cultural assumptions after they had experienced a course in cultural diversity. Four themes were noted: (i) reflexivity about culture, (ii) orientation toward activism and advocacy, (iii) differences in attitudes toward sexual orientation and religion, and (iv) increased alertness to culture. Implications for culturally alert practice are discussed.

**Keywords** Multicultural · Moral development · Cultural relativism · Counselor education

*This is what you shall do: reexamine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul...*

(From Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1855)

*The [culturally encapsulated] counselor, like the rest of mankind [sic], protects himself against the disturbing reality of change by the maintenance of an encapsulation within a subculture of his own... It is necessary for the counselor to examine his personal patterns of pretended reality.*

(Gilbert Wrenn, *The Culturally Encapsulated Counselor*, 1962, p. 444)

## Introduction

With the above words, two powerful voices of previous centuries promote cultural relativism. Indeed, they consider cultural relativism to be a foundation for a tolerant, democratic society. It is also a prerequisite for becoming a culturally competent counselor

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(Dimmock and Walker 2005; Leach *et al.* 2010; Lewis 2003; Pedersen *et al.* 2002; Ponterotto *et al.* 2006; Sue and Sue 2008).

The authors of this present study have attempted to realize Whitman and Wrenn's words by creating and implementing a cultural de-centering intervention with students of counseling. In particular, we wondered whether some students were more or less mentally ready for de-centering, based on their moral development. We hoped that, with information of this kind, counselor educators could then design educational practices that might increase cultural relativism in future counselors.

What is de-centering? It might best be defined in relation to its opposite; that is, ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism represents a tendency to judge all behavior from a particular cultural lens. It has been named as a problem in the field of counseling (Sue 2004). Research has found there to be a lack of cultural awareness, and the related presence of bias (Weber 1994), among a significant number of counselors (e.g., Boyson 2009; Cartwright *et al.* 2008; Constantine 2006). By contrast, cultural relativism, or de-centering, involves the counselor considering her or his culture to be one among many, with all being viable under particular circumstances. In Dimmock and Walker's (2005) words, culturally de-centered counselors appreciate that their "own practices are cultural in origin, rather than the 'only right way to do things'" (p. 190). This process of de-centering is a desirable, indeed necessary, aspect of cultural competence and, therefore, an essential aspect of counselor education for professional counselors (Bennett 2009; Sue and Sue 2008).

### Cultural-Centrism, Cultural Relativism, and Counseling

Franz Boas, who coined the term "cultural relativism" in 1928, saw all cultures as adaptations to their unique and particular sets of circumstances. Accordingly, he eschewed the notion that any culture could be superior to another in a universal or objective sense. By contrast, a culture-centric attitude consists of seeing one culture at the center, and all others as satellites. Individuals who are at the culture-centric end of the continuum tend to be embedded in a narrow perspective of what is good, right and true in terms of culture. They consider their own cultural group(s) to be superior, or even "real", while others are inferior or fabrications (Bennett 1993).

Boas recognized that ethnocentrism was dangerous for human communities. Consistent with that view, individuals with higher levels of in-group bias are more negative toward members of other ethnic groups (e.g., Masson and Verkuyten 1993; Negy *et al.* 2003; Tzeng and Jackson 1994). Culture-centrism is not limited to any one culture, but there are differences in consequences (Brammer 2012).

Dominant groups have the power to enforce their view of their own cultural superiority onto others (McAuliffe *et al.* 2008a). This occurred in the United States with the so-called 'Indian Schools' of the last century, where American Indians were trained to become "civilized"; that is, more like European Americans in world-view, religion, dress, language and customs. Culture-centrism can be expressed on a national scale, as in the case of African American culture being viewed as inferior throughout much of U.S. history (McAuliffe, Kim, and Park 2008). At its worst, culture-centrism plays a part in genocide, such as that practiced by the Nazis in Germany or by Europeans when they encountered native peoples on the American continents.

On an individual level, culture-centrism can lead to disapproval, moralizing, or imposition of one's values on another. Gilbert Wrenn (1962) raised an early alarm in his definition of the aforementioned culturally encapsulated counselor. He declared, in an update of his 1962 statement, "[It is] dangerous thinking for a counselor...to interpret the world to the client from within the counselor's particular...life experience" (Wrenn 1985, p. 326).

The movement from ethnocentrism to cultural relativism involves both an enhanced openness to and a valuing of different cultures. This dual shift can be viewed as a process of ‘de-centering’. Piaget (1936/1963) introduced the notion of de-centering as the process of coordinating experience from more than one perspective. This process is applicable to counselors’ multicultural competence. In fact, in their seminal delineation of cultural competencies for counselors, Sue *et al.* (1992) noted, “Culturally skilled counselors are aware of how their own cultural backgrounds, experiences, attitudes, and values...influence psychological processes” (p. 482). Therefore, counselors must be able to relativize their cultural lenses through acts of cultural empathy (Chung and Bemak 2002).

Cultural relativism, while necessary for cultural competence, is not automatic in adults. In fact, some level of culture-centrism (or ethnocentrism) is inevitable in all human beings (Bennett 1993). As cultural relativism is used here, it involves a consistent ability to reflect on one’s own cultural lenses and empathically understand other cultural perspectives.

Culture-centrism and cultural relativism have been described by Robert Kegan (1998) in terms of *having* culture (cultural relativism) as opposed to the culture *having you* (culture-centrism). Individuals whose culture “has them” are, in Kegan’s terms, “subject to” their cultures (culture-centrism), thereby being likely to impose them on others (Kegan 1998). By contrast, Kegan describes those who “have” their cultures as being able to stand back and not automatically adhere to cultural norms. The latter have an “outside” perspective on the place of their cultures and are, therefore, able to entertain alternate perspectives about cultural norms. So it is with the related notion of moral development, which describes a person’s relative ability to take a perspective on moral conventions.

In sum, the culture-centric counselor is more likely to impose his or her cultural norms on a client, failing to empathically appreciate the client’s differing cultural perspective. By contrast, cultural relativism, has been considered to be a core condition of effective multicultural counseling (Chung and Bemak 2002; Pedersen *et al.* 2002).

### Cultural Relativism as a Moral Epistemological Achievement

Moral reasoning, or epistemology (i.e., how one comes to know), consists of how an individual frames ethical and social issues. This reasoning can be more or less inclusive and complex. Most importantly for educational purposes, moral reasoning can evolve through sequential stages (Kohlberg 1984). Kohlberg’s theory of moral development is an application of Piaget’s description of developmental epistemology, which consists of an increasingly more expanded and adequate approach to knowing.

In simple terms, moral reasoning can evolve through three major shifts. Kohlberg proposed, and subsequent research has affirmed, that each stage is more adequate in responding to moral dilemmas than its predecessor (Brendel *et al.* 2002a, b; Foster and McAdams 1998; Morgan *et al.* 2000; Peace and Sprinthall 1998). The first and least adaptive stage for functioning in a diverse world is *pre-conventional* thinking, in which self-interest is the guiding principle. The second is *conventional* thinking, in which socially prescribed norms guide a person’s thinking and action. The third stage is called *postconventional* thinking, in which self-determined principles guide moral actions. Postconventional moral thinking is characterized by the individual having self-chosen ethical principles rather than taken-for-granted convention/culture-bound views on what is good, right, or beautiful (Kohlberg 1984). Helping students to achieve postconventional thinking can be seen as an overall goal of counselor education (McAuliffe 2011). Growth in moral development requires that the individual experience challenge (e.g., to old ways of thinking) and support for making the transition to a more expanded schema.

Higher levels of moral development are correlated to enhanced multicultural sensitivity (Endicott *et al.* 2003; Granello 2010; Grothaus *et al.* 2010; Taylor 1994). It follows that postconventional moral thinking would seem to be a prerequisite frame of mind for cultural relativism.

### Multicultural Counselor Education

Multicultural counselor education (MCE) can be viewed as an epistemological endeavor—one that invites students to examine *how* they have come to think about culture, not only *what* they know about culture. That shift can be seen as movement from a convention-based epistemology; that is, a way of knowing that ultimately relies on “received” tradition. The term ‘received’ is used by Belenky *et al.* (1997) to refer to individuals being able to accept and reproduce knowledge that is communicated by external authorities, such as religious authorities, parents or teachers. Such individuals do not view themselves as being able to create their own stances.

Movement from this convention-reliant epistemology can occur under development-enhancing conditions. That movement can result in a shift toward “relativistic” (Perry 1981) or postconventional (Kohlberg 1984) knowing. With a relativistic epistemology, a counselor can weigh multiple perspectives in the process of making ethical and other decisions, in contrast to having automatic adherence to a cultural imperative. Armed with a postconventional epistemology, counselors can de-center from assuming that what is normative for their culture is right for other cultures also. Thus, relativistic counselors would be open to, for example, alternate family structures, communication styles, notions of sexuality, and views on hierarchy.

Based on such considerations, the authors sought to examine the possibility of associations between counselors’ moral reasoning and their beliefs about key cultural issues. Available evidence suggests that a significant number of students of counseling use a conventional epistemology (Lovell 1999; Neukrug and McAuliffe 1993) and, therefore, are likely to be culture-centric to the detriment of clients (Sue 2004). It was hoped that exploring the relationship between moral development levels and counselors’ views on culture could inform counselor educators’ efforts to enhance counseling students’ cultural relativism.

The findings of this study delineate the thematic differences in views about cultural issues in groups of students at different levels of moral development. In addition, suggested interventions are offered to assist counselor educators in designing and implementing apt educational experiences targeting students’ epistemologies and encouraging them to take a postconventional stance toward knowing. In the process, as previous research suggests, cultural relativism is likely to be enhanced (Endicott *et al.* 2003; Granello 2010; Grothaus *et al.* 2010; Taylor 1994).

### Methodology

Utilizing grounded theory methodology to guide the investigation (Strauss and Corbin 1998), the authors engaged in three data collection procedures over two semesters. The procedures involved administering the *Defining Issues Test-2* (DIT-2; Rest *et al.* 1999a, b) and the *Beliefs and Customs Inventory-Revised* (BCI-R; McAuliffe *et al.* 2009), followed by modified subject-object interviews (*Modified Subject-Object Interview*; SOI; Lahey *et al.* 1988) with selected participants. Selecting the participants to interview, involved identifying

high and low scorers on the DIT-2. This “extreme cases sample” method (Patton 2002) was used in order to discover differential readiness for cultural de-centering among students.

The investigation was guided by the following two research questions:

1. How might conventional and postconventional thinkers experience their relationships to culture?
2. How might conventional and postconventional thinkers’ relationships with culture vary by cultural domain (i.e., race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, gender, and religion)?

### Instrumentation

The *Defining Issues Test-2* (DIT-2; Rest *et al.* 1999a, b) is used to measure moral reasoning or judgment. It is based on Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning and uses a multiple-choice format to rate and rank 12 possible responses to five moral dilemmas.

Construct and convergent validity of the instrument have been demonstrated in other studies. There have been significantly positive correlations with Kohlberg’s Moral Judgment Inventory (MJI) and the Comprehension of Moral Concepts test (Davison 1979; Kohlberg 1979; Rest 1979, 1994). In addition, the DIT-2 exhibits discriminant validity as compared to general intelligence, verbal ability, personality trait instruments, conservative/liberal political attitudes and social desirability measures (Rest *et al.* 1999a). The DIT-2’s test-retest reliability has been shown to be in the upper 70s and low 80s (Rest *et al.* 1999a, b).

While several scores are generated by the data on the DIT-2, the authors chose to use the Type Indicator score, based on the work of Bebeau and Thoma (2003) and Thoma and Rest (1999). Thoma and Rest (1999) noted the possibility of seven types. Those subjects in Type 1 would be consistently using moral reasoning indicative of the personal interest schema. Types 2 and 3 would be transitional, with Type 2 subjects favoring personal interests but having some indicators of using a ‘maintaining social norms’ framework. In Type 3, the maintaining social norms reasoning would be predominant, but the evidence of using a personal interest framework would be noticeably present.

Type 4 scores indicate a stable use of maintaining norms in moral reasoning, with use of ‘conventional’ reasoning. Types 5 and 6 are also transitional stages between maintaining norms and the use of moral ideas, likely within a ‘postconventional’ reasoning schema. Type 7 is the highest level and indicates a consolidated use of postconventional moral reasoning. Bebeau and Thoma (2003) noted that use of the type indices “provide more fine-grained ways of examining the effects of development and/or the impact of educational interventions” (p. 20).

*Modified Subject-Object Interview* (SOI; Lahey *et al.* 1988). This semi-structured interview aims at evoking the personal epistemology of an individual; that is, how he or she decides a particular stance to take on an issue. The SOI is based on the subject-object theory of Kegan (1982, 1998), which posits that human meaning-making can evolve under certain conditions, and that what was once “subject” can become “object” as the individual takes a new perspective on the initial assumption.

The SOI authors recommend that interviews be adapted to particular domains, and the focus here was on culture-evoking issues. The SOI was conducted by two doctoral students who had been trained by the first author in the SOI interviewing process. The interview included the following epistemology-evoking questions: “What are your current views on race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and religion?”, “What are your received views [of these constructs]?”, “How did you come to your current views?”, “Did the course [you

were involved in] affect any of those views?” The aim of the SOI was to gain a richer understanding of participants’ relationship to cultures.

The *Beliefs and Customs Inventory-Revised* (BCI-R; McAuliffe *et al.* 2009) was developed for use in this study. The BCI-R is based on the constructive development theory of Kegan (1982, 1998). Kegan indicates that shifts in epistemological reasoning are triggered by experiences of “contradiction” to an old way of knowing, followed by introduction to a more inclusive frame of mind. The major shift for adults in Kegan’s theory is from the third order of consciousness, in which the individual relies on external authorities for meaning, to the fourth order, in which the individual can define meanings for her- or himself, with relative autonomy.

The BCI-R inventory asked participants to reflect on their beliefs about race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Participants were to report, in regard to six domains (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, gender, and religion—see Fig. 1), their (1) received beliefs, (2) alternate beliefs (the “contradiction”), (3) perspectives on the topic at the beginning of the course, (4) current perspectives, and (5) how they came to their current perspectives. These five topics aimed at evoking the participant’s relationship to her or his culture and reasons for current positions; that is, how embedded or self-defining she or he was around those beliefs.

The instrument was originally developed for use in multicultural counseling classes. It was piloted for two semesters, and revised for clarity after each semester based upon feedback from participants and consultation with colleagues (McAuliffe 2008; McAuliffe and Milliken 2009). Other than the aforementioned efforts to enhance construct validity, no additional information was gathered regarding reliability or other types of validity.

## Participants

The final sample (extracted from all students involved in four different graduate counseling or undergraduate cultural diversity courses during a two-semester time period at a large university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States) consisted of 27 students. These participants were selected and divided into two groups based on their Type indicators on the DIT-2: (1) those who were characterized by predominantly conventional moral schema, and (2) those who used a consolidated postconventional schema. The intent was to find extreme cases of high and low scores among students enrolled in multicultural graduate counseling and undergraduate human services classes.

Members of the postconventional group were those with a Type indicator score of 7, which is the highest score possible on the DIT-2, whilst the conventional group consisted of students scoring 4 or below. The conventional group comprised 12 members: 11 females, one male; seven undergraduate, five graduate; six White, six African-American. The 15 members of the postconventional group consisted of: 13 females, two males; three undergraduate, 12 graduate; 12 White, three African-American.

## Researchers

The researchers consisted of two male counselor educators and two female doctoral students, all White, with interest and experience in both the multicultural and moral developmental domains. Biases among the researchers included the belief that cultural de-centering is important for becoming an effective counselor. Furthermore, we agreed on the notion that students’ unquestioned acceptance of received, or convention-based, beliefs could be successfully challenged in a developmental educational environment.

**Fig. 1** Sample directions for a section of the *Beliefs and Customs Inventory-Revised*

<p><b>I. Directions for Column 1. Received Views</b></p> <p>In the boxes below, name some strong, deeply held beliefs, values, or customs that you were taught through home, school, or religion in each of the categories. These beliefs, values, or customs may or may not be ones that you currently hold. Write one for each category in Column 1 in your own words.</p>				
<p><b>II. Directions for Column 2. Alternate Perspectives from Received Ones</b></p> <p>In the second column, “Alternate Perspectives,” write an alternative belief, value, or custom for each box, one that differs from the one that you were taught.</p>				
<p><b>III. Directions for Column 3. Perspective at the Beginning of the Course</b></p> <p>In the third column, describe the perspective you had at the beginning of the course. It might have been the same, slightly different, or very different from the perspectives named in columns 1 and 2.</p>				
<p><b>IV. Directions for Column 4. Current Perspective</b></p> <p>In the fourth column, name an alternate perspective from your current one only IF YOUR CURRENT VIEW IS DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE YOU WROTE IN COLUMN 1 AND 2. OTHERWISE LEAVE COLUMN 4 BLANK.</p>				
<p><b>V. Directions for Column 5</b></p> <p>Write your reasons for each of your current perspectives. What has contributed to your current beliefs?</p>				
<p><b>Regarding Homosexuality:</b></p>				
<p><b>Column 1</b></p> <p><b>Belief, Value, or Custom Taught to Me Early on</b></p> <p>(“Received View”)</p>	<p><b>Column 2</b></p> <p><b>Alternate Perspective from Received ones</b></p> <p>(Name an alternative belief, value, or custom, one that is different, even opposite, from the received one that you named in Col. 1.)</p>	<p><b>Column 3</b></p> <p><b>Perspective at the Beginning of the Course</b></p> <p>(What was the view you had at the beginning of the course? It might have been the same as or different from the received view.)</p>	<p><b>Column 4</b></p> <p><b>Current Perspective</b></p>	<p><b>Column 5</b></p> <p><b>The Basis for My Current Perspective</b></p> <p>(How did you come to know your current view?)</p>

## Data Collection

At the end of each of the four cultural diversity courses, all students completed the DIT-2 (Rest *et al.* 1999b). As indicated above, the Type Indicator scores were used to sort students into two groups representing postconventional moral reasoning (Type Indicator score of 7) and conventional moral reasoning (Type indicator score of 4 or below). Toward the end of the course, all students also completed the BCI-R (McAuliffe *et al.* 2009). Twenty-seven students from both classes scored in either the predominantly postconventional schema (15 students) or the predominantly conventional schema (12 students) on their Type Indicator scores

In order to triangulate the data sources, researchers randomly chose three participants from each group (conventional and postconventional) and interviewed these six participants using an adaptation of the *Subject-Object Interview* (Lahey *et al.* 1988). The interview participants consisted of five females and one male. Four participants identified themselves as White and two as African American. Three were members of the undergraduate course and three were graduate students. In the interview, researchers asked probing questions in an attempt to determine the epistemological origins of their answers on the BCI-R. Each of the six recorded interviews was transcribed verbatim and sent to each participant for member-checking verification and accuracy (Creswell 2003).

## Data Analysis

Once the transcribed interviews were returned from participants, each of the four researchers independently read the transcriptions of the six interviews along with the answers on the 27 BCI-R items. After bracketing our assumptions and biases, we read and re-read the transcripts to gain an overall sense of each document (Creswell 2003). In each subsequent reading, we made notes regarding our initial impressions (Patton 2002). We then each assembled lists of participant statements that appeared to represent their perspectives. These statements were assembled into groups that had similar meanings.

Researchers utilized an open coding process in order to explore possible categories, trends, concepts, and properties that might exist among the respondents (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This process was accomplished by a careful reading of each phrase used by participants to capture nuances of meaning. The research team members each used selective coding (i.e., “the integration of data, concepts, and categories into a coherent theory”; Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 144) to synthesize the various categories and process indices into a theory explaining the levels of cultural relativity and culture-centeredness among the two groups of participants.

The researchers then met together on several occasions to discuss their independent themes. After discussion of similarities and differences in findings, consensus was reached on the final four themes (Creswell 2003).

## Results

Four themes emerged from the analysis. Within these themes, trends that distinguished conventional and postconventional thinkers were noted. However, we treated the varying results as a continuum; that is, without bifurcating them into conventional and postconventional thinkers. These four themes were:

### Theme One: Degree of Reflexivity about Culture

This theme is defined as the extent to which individuals tolerate ambiguity and seek multiple perspectives, including inviting contradictions to their current views, recognizing their personal context as a basis for their views, and allowing themselves to be in process regarding their views. At one extreme an individual can maintain a dialectical stance (Basseches 1984), weighing multiple and even contradictory positions. At the other extreme, an individual treats positions as final truths, being closed to any doubts or new evidence.

Reflexivity or lack thereof can be framed in terms of the subject-object relationship that was previously mentioned—that is, what an individual is “subject to” versus what she or he “takes as object” (Kegan 1998)—and indicates the level of de-centering she or he has achieved. Non-reflexive thinkers are “subject to” their cultures; that is, they do not stand in relation to them. They are embedded in their culture, looking out from it at the center. Reflexive thinkers take their cultures “as object”; that is, they are de-centered enough to view cultures as relative to each other.

In that vein, participants in this study showed varying degrees of awareness of their cultural assumptions and of the ability to be in relation to those assumptions, as opposed to receiving them without question. Conventional thinkers generally demonstrated relatively unquestioned allegiance to received values. For example, when asked how a participant had come to her view on religion, a conventional thinker said, “I attend church. My pastor preaches...just do what you’re supposed to do in life, you know, just follow the Ten Commandments.” Similar tautological thinking is evident in this quote from a conventional thinker: “I just strongly believe in my beliefs.”

When conventional thinkers showed some cross-cultural empathy, it was generally due to a single personal encounter with a cultural other, which we called “sympathetic solipsism,” rather than a reasoned process. Solipsistic thinking is the assumption that the self can be aware of nothing but its own experiences. One participant said, “My thoughts have changed on [women’s and men’s roles in child-rearing] because my mother is a single mom and I have watched her raise me all by herself and no one else.” This participant provided no further, non-solipsistic evidence for the view. Nor did they mention the social justice implications of oppression. They relied on their personal experiences for guidance.

By contrast, the trend toward more flexible, in-process thinking about culture tended to be characteristic of the postconventional thinkers. This has been described as speaking in measured tones (Belenky *et al.* 1997). The ability to reflexively suspend judgment is revealed in these quotes, “I am trying to become more aware of my biases and change them,” and “I recognize that my behavior does not always parallel my beliefs. I need to work on this daily.” Postconventional thinkers were willing to be in-process rather than foreclosing on a position. They tended to go through an ambiguity-tolerating, reflexive process of deciding on a stance. In Kegan’s terms (1998) they were catching themselves trying to be too complete.

The following comment further illustrates the inclination to be in-process (note indicators in italics):

Some of the social issues conflict with my religion. I have a hard time reconciling those. If you want me to vote for same sex marriage, I *gotta think about that*. And I have to *re-explore and re-evaluate* my beliefs in a whole bunch of other areas before I could come to some decision on that particular topic.

This search for considered evidence contrasts to the automaticity of tradition-bound, authority-centered thinkers.

## Theme Two: Orientation toward Activism/Advocacy

Orientation toward Activism/Advocacy captures the relative commitment to social justice actions, ranging from action-less tolerance to activist impulse. The extremes on this theme ranged from some individuals expressing an action-less tolerance, to others declaring a principled activism (D'Andrea and Daniels 1999).

No conventional thinker spoke about activism or advocacy for non-dominant cultural groups. By contrast, seven of the 15 postconventional thinkers spontaneously brought up advocacy, without prompting. Action-less tolerance might be represented by this quote from a conventional thinker:

I feel that if a man wants to date a man or a female wants to date a female then that's just the feelings that they have and they can't help that. But, along with my religion, like, I also, I don't condone it.

A number of postconventional thinkers' comments indicating their advocacy impulses were aimed at oppression of sexual minorities: "It [the course in social and cultural issues in counseling] made me *want to advocate for the GLBTQ population* even stronger. I realize I need to be more active in my support for them." Another participant stated, "I think they all [gay persons] need to have the same rights that we do and it would be something that I would be *willing to fight* for and with them."

Here is an illustration of the effect of the course on a postconventional thinker's readiness to undertake advocacy in the area of racism:

There have been many times in my past that I have witnessed racism from some of my family members and family friends, and I felt like I could not do anything because of the age difference. Now I know that this is not the case, and having talked about these issues in class has allowed me to look at my situation and realize that *I can do something* to educate others in my family.

Such a move might be explained by postconventional thinkers' pre-course openness to the experiences of cultural others. They tended to already take a culture-appreciative stance toward non-dominant cultural groups. Therefore, the next step for them would be to decide to act affirmatively on the ideas discussed and experienced in the course.

It is indicative of postconventional moral reasoning to challenge social norms in favor of acting on principles. Two notions in the developmental literature parallel these findings. The 'constructive knowing' position found by Belenky *et al.* (1997) in their research includes the desire for individuals to want their voices and actions to make a difference in the world. The second notion is 'critical consciousness' (Freire 2005), which can be defined as the capacity to consciously re-evaluate one's relationships with culture, the sociopolitical world, and the historical age, and to take action against oppressive elements in society (Freire 2005; Mustakova-Poussard 2003). By contrast, conventional thinkers rely largely on accepted social norms for guidance.

## Theme Three: Domain-Specific Sensibilities

This theme captured the varying levels of empathy toward different cultures/social groups. Sexual orientation and religion stood out as powerful indicators of participants' levels of cultural de-centering. This theme was defined as having varying levels of diversity appreciativeness depending on the cultural grouping.

The topics of race and social class did not appear to generate as much ‘new learning’ from the course as the topics of sexual orientation and religion. For example, in the area of race/ethnicity, many participants, including conventional thinkers, used race-appreciative language to describe their stance. Among the many possible explanations for this, two merit mention here. While racial bias and oppression are still readily evident in mainstream culture and in counseling, it may be that, as was evident in theme two, passive acceptance of racial/ethnic equality is now the accepted social norm in the context of the college-going population. Because of this perceived race/ethnic-tolerance norm, conventional thinkers do not have to challenge convention to be non-racist, at least as far as they publicly acknowledge. Thus the social norm of speaking in terms of racial and ethnic equality may reflect the socially unacceptable nature of expressing racial/ethnic prejudice.

The domains of religion and sexual orientation brought out unexamined intolerance from some participants and, by contrast, the challenging of received negative attitudes among others. Religious precepts tended to receive more unquestioned acceptance among conventional thinkers. Postconventional thinkers had generally de-centered, or were in the process of doing so, from the literal acceptance of the teachings of their religion of origin, if they had such.

Sexual orientation was tied to religion in many cases for conventional thinkers, as they were more likely to indicate that their religion declared homosexuality to be wrong. Thus, that was their position also. For example, one conventional thinker explained, “I am a Christian...I’m fine with LGBTQs’ personal orientation but don’t put your lifestyle on me....I don’t think I would be able to counsel this group....I prefer for them not to discuss problems with me.” For this participant, the matter was not up for examination.

It should be noted, however, that some conventional thinkers showed a multiplistic tolerance toward persons who are gay and lesbian, with their evidence being that they had friends who were gay. The foundation of this stance appeared to be their friendships, rather than a nuanced understanding of the social issues that challenge gay persons. These individuals did not show a broader understanding of the social oppression that gay individuals experience, nor did they use evidence beyond their own experience.

By contrast, postconventional thinkers showed a de-centering from their received views on homosexuality. An example is seen in this response to the BCI-R: Her ‘received view’ was: “Homosexuality is seen as morally wrong and unacceptable in the eyes of God.” Her current view was expressed thus:

I don’t agree with the individuals who believe homosexuals should burn in Hell...  
These individuals can have a hard time being accepted and lose their support group. I  
hope one day the world can come to understand them and accept them as anyone else.

She had claimed a different perspective from her received one.

With regard to social norms about gender identity and expression, one student with a postconventional score demonstrated this challenge to social norms and de-centering from received knowing. The participant stated:

After examining my own gender roles and hearing other classmates’ gender role experiences, it is very clear to me that we give gender its meaning. Therefore, we have the power to change the meaning of gender and to accept other ideas about gender that may differ from our own.

The experience of examining others views led to a shift in position.

In the area of religion, some conventional thinkers indicated a beginning movement toward de-centering. They showed a willingness to examine received beliefs in light of exposure to alternate worldviews. This position might, following Perry (1981), be called

multiplistic tolerance. Here is a narrative from the received view material (Column 1) in the BCI-R: “[I was raised] Christian Baptist. Jesus died on the cross to redeem the world. I can do all things through Christ and obey the Ten Commandments.” Then the “current perspective” (Column 4) was expressed: “I am more open-minded to gaining knowledge and information on other religions.” This participant showed a beginning interest in checking out alternate views, albeit in a seemingly static, concrete way.

#### Theme Four: Expanded Awareness

Fourteen of the 15 participants (93%) with scores indicating postconventional moral reasoning and nine of the 12 participants (75%) with conventional scores reported enhanced self-awareness and/or knowledge about aspects of culture after the course. Examples of statements included, “[The class] forced me to look at my own beliefs and accept some while rejecting others. It made me realize that I do have a culture and how it has shaped my life.” Another participant stated, “I now have more skills that I can use to check my biases.” A third member intoned, “I’ve realized that there is a lot I don’t know and I need to continue to learn.”

In terms of attributions for the enhanced cultural knowledge and awareness, the most frequently cited source was an exposure to cultural informants who represented cultural identities not shared by the participant. For example, one participant said,

I came to have this perspective after I completed the Immersion project in which I went to a Jewish temple and realized how welcoming they all were despite the fact I wasn’t Jewish. I realized that if a Jewish individual visited a Christian church they [the Christians] may not be as welcoming and wonder why they were there.

With regard to sexual orientation, one participant identified a course-related trigger for a notable shift in perspective: “The interview in class [with a guest discussant who was gay] was what changed my perspective about homosexuality.” Another echoed the personal contact with a cultural other as most impactful in these words,

The workshop on gays and lesbians [with guest discussants] was the most significant factor in changing my views about gays and lesbians. I was very naïve about the culture of gays and lesbians as well as the challenges. I think the workshop was life changing for me! I could have never gotten that experience from a book.

Also noted as helpful in the course were: the readings and the classroom discussions about culture; the personal reflections through in-class exercises and journaling between classes (e.g., about own biases, privileged statuses), cultural immersion exercises/assignments, and the efforts by the instructors to provide both a supportive environment along with challenges that might provoke disequilibrium, which in turn may prompt growth. The following sample participant statement illustrates this:

The reason why I have opened my mind to the different aspects of these topics is because [the instructor] challenged our own state of mind to look beyond what we have been taught and [encouraged us to] create our own beliefs.

### Discussion and Implications

Three of the four themes that emerged from the data appear to be consistent with much of the extant research. The first two themes, the enhanced display of flexible and reflexive

thinking and the inclination among postconventional thinkers to challenge social norms and engage in advocacy, echo previous findings (e.g., Bennett 1993; Brendel *et al.* 2002a, b; Evans and Foster 2000; McAuliffe and Lovell 2006; Morgan *et al.* 2000; Vinson and Neimeyer 2003). As for the fourth theme, namely the experience of increased cultural awareness and knowledge after taking a multicultural course, the findings once again confirm an august body of research attesting to this phenomenon (e.g., Endicott *et al.* 2003; Ponterotto *et al.* 2000; Vinson and Neimeyer 2003).

The third theme evident in the data, namely the domain-specific display of varying levels of openness toward different cultural groups, might indicate that there is currently a conventional norm of racial tolerance and gender equality, but that it appears to be still somewhat unconventional to accept homosexuality. For conventional thinkers, the latter might be too great a challenge, especially as it contradicts received religion.

There are parallels to moral/cognitive development theory in the findings on participants' degree of reflexivity. To wit: conventional thinkers tend to use inherited customs and traditions; that is, conventions, as the bases for their views. Kohlberg noted that such culture-centric thinking can result in oppression of others, especially marginalized groups in society (Kohlberg 1981, 1984). Indeed, Kohlberg's work was triggered by his concern about how Nazism, with its attendant racism, flourished.

Those counselors who are largely conventional thinkers thus might fail to challenge racism, heterosexism, and religious bias. They, instead, would likely follow authorities or the common sentiment, rather than authorizing their own views. We believe it is a task of counselor education, and indeed of higher education in general, to enhance self-authorized (Kegan 1998) or "procedural" (Belenky *et al.* 1997) knowing. Such a way of knowing emphasizes thoughtful, autonomous deciding about what is good or right. This development can be triggered by students experiencing dilemmas that challenge their conventional way of knowing. Piaget (1936/1963) described this upending of equilibrium as "disequilibration." In general, educators can help students have personal contact experiences with diverse peoples and ideas, then provide a balance of support and challenge to promote reflection and growth on this experience (Brendel *et al.* 2002a, b; Grothaus 2004; Reiman and Thies-Sprinthall 1993).

### Suggestions for Counselor Educator Intervention

In order to encourage conventional thinkers to become more reflexive and autonomous, counselor educators and supervisors might present dilemmas to students' current epistemologies. There are at least three ways that counselor educators can instigate such disequilibration in thinkers who hold rigid views on cultural difference. The first is through having conventional thinkers note their peers' views and thinking processes. In that vein, students might see their peers holding contrasting views, as in peers taking a gay-affirmative position. They can also see peers who tolerate ambiguity and seek new evidence to guide their thinking.

In addition, they might see dominant group members sharing their social justice commitments, which might surprise some students. This suggestion parallels Perry's (1981) findings on students' views of learning. He found that so-called dualists (concrete, authority-centered thinkers) relied on experts to give them truth rather than seeing themselves and their peers as knowledge-creators. Recognizing peers' struggles with idea creation could disequilibrate the authority-centered tendency of the conventional thinker.

A second way to have students experience diverse, convention-challenging ideas is to encourage them to experience meaningful personal contact with cultural 'others'. This can include

both cultural immersions and outreach experiences (Nilsson *et al.* 2011) as well as inviting guest discussants from various cultural groups to share their life stories. In those forums, students can be confronted by the humanity of guest discussants and by the suffering that is due to common biases and oppressive behaviors (Sue and Sue 2008). Here is a quote from a conventional thinker that illustrates the power of personal contact with the cultural “other:”

They [classmates making a presentation] had a guest come in and you would have never known [that she was gay]. Like, you cannot judge a person by their outside. ... They, they are just like everybody else. And, they just want to be accepted in the community and in society and it’s very hard for them because people judge them and they don’t get jobs because of it. ... But, I mean, I learned they’re just like everybody else and they just want to be accepted.

We, therefore, recommend having diverse guest discussants share their life stories and present issues about that diversity. In addition, the requirement for a significant ‘immersion’ with another cultural group has been shown to enhance both moral development and cultural sensitivity (Endicott *et al.* 2003; Nilsson *et al.* 2011).

On a related note, it seems important that students not be overchallenged by a flood of new ideas. One method that Kegan (1982) and others recommend is that individuals have “bridges” that can help them experience contradictions to their received notions. Kegan calls this bridging “the culture of continuity” in that the current culture is a transition for a broadened perspective. For example, a Christian who is anti-gay might learn that Jesus was tolerant of others. Similar examples can be found in models of alternative thinking from one’s cultural group (e.g., White Southerners who fought for civil rights or a religious person who advocates for equity for LGBT persons).

A third way of disequilibrating conventional thinking is for instructors or supervisors to instigate, and demonstrate, non-judgmental, reflexive thinking (Glassoff and Durham 2010). Specifically, the supervisor/instructor can model open inquiry and tolerance (open-mindedness, empathy, multiple perspective-taking) and evidence-based inquiry (Belenky *et al.* 1997).

### Future Inquiries

Several questions remain. Therefore, fertile areas for further investigation are evident. The first area for future inquiry lies in focusing on cultural relativists. The predominant focus in the literature has been on encouraging movement toward cultural relativism for culture-centric students. However, more attention can be paid to promoting continued development in students who already display postconventional moral reasoning levels. With continuing development, they might enact their cultural relativism in the form of advocating for nondominant group members and teaching others to be more relativistic. In Kegan’s (1998) terms, they might move toward dialectal thinking, further examining their potentially dogmatic positions.

A second promising area for further exploration lies in exploring the use of individualized instruction for students who display differing levels of cultural relativism and/or moral reasoning. Counselor educators would aim to provide an optimal support/challenge blend for each student or supervisee; one that gives each student a sense of safety but also encourages movement out of his or her comfort zone.

With many of the postconventional thinkers appearing to be poised for advocacy, a third promising possibility for inquiry involves counselor educators instigating an action-oriented advocacy stance in students, including promoting an enhanced ability as systems change agents (D’Andrea and Daniels 2010; Odegard and Vereen 2010; Ratts and Wood 2011). For example, in the second author’s doctoral multicultural course, students are required to engage in an

extended immersion experience that includes advocacy action with their chosen cultural group. Inviting practicing counselors who have an advocacy orientation and successful advocacy experiences to speak as guest discussants or to engage in mentoring with these advocacy-oriented students may also prove to be beneficial.

An additional area for future research efforts lies in the realm of selection of students for admission to counselor education programs. Consideration for possibly adding examination of moral development and/or cultural relativism as part of the admissions criteria may merit further inquiry.

### Limitations

There are at least four limitations that must be acknowledged in this study. First, while we believe that the findings are trustworthy for the group we studied, the degree of transferability to other contexts cannot be assumed. Second, while the DIT-2 has mechanisms to detect socially desirable answers (Bebeau and Thoma 2003), the BCI-R does not possess such safeguards. It is possible that social desirability influenced the data. A third limiting factor was the choice to use extreme cases (Patton 2002). While this appeared to be helpful in discerning differences between students at distinct places on the moral reasoning continuum, it left the researchers without data to ascertain the experience of the students “in the middle.” Finally, the researchers were all White, educated (master’s plus) professionals. While we discussed and challenged our biases throughout the process, the possibility remains that researcher cultural bias influenced the findings.

### Conclusion

Multicultural counselor education aims at increasing counselor trainees’ awareness of their own and others’ cultures. As such, it is an epistemological endeavor, as it aims at expanding counselors’ fundamental ways of knowing in the direction of greater relativism. In this study, such movement was detected in some students. Also, predispositions toward greater or lesser cultural relativism were noted, based on moral developmental level.

Four trends were noted. More conventional thinkers were less relativistic about culture. Postconventional thinkers had a greater orientation toward social action. Conventional thinkers had more fixed views on sexual orientation and religion. Finally, participants showed increased alertness to culture after multicultural counseling courses.

In light of these findings, counselor educators are advised intentionally to confront conventional students’ cultural assumptions by presenting dilemmas, instigating meaningful personal contact with cultural others, and encouraging peer modeling of open-mindedness, and also to promote the movement toward advocacy for both conventional and postconventional thinkers. The result would likely be development-enhancing counselor education.

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