Ethnocultural Resistance to Multicultural Training: Students and Faculty

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Teaching diversity courses in mental health programs presents a unique set of issues for the faculty. These courses generate various forms of emotional reactions in students that could take the form of anger, silence, avoidance, and passivity. The purpose of this article is to specifically focus on the experience of students of color who find themselves in these courses and the various ways they respond. This learning process is often impeded by resistance because of the personal experiences of all students, but students of color experience a unique set of resistances in each stage of this process, either because of their own experience or because of a lack of experience with racism, racial and biracial identity development, cultural and bicultural identity, or acculturation issues. Resistance in the classroom interferes with the reciprocal communication between instructors and students and interferes with learning and the development of trust between instructors and students of color. Suggestions are made to help faculty to understand these resistances and to develop appropriate responses for working through the process.
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Teaching diversity courses in mental health training programs presents a unique set of issues for the faculty to confront. The faculty have to evaluate objectively their own preparedness to manage the process issues of the course as they unfold in the classroom. These issues are often manifested through anger, silence, avoidance, and passivity toward participating in the process. Generally these courses tend to be made up of mostly

I would like to thank all the students of color who have shared this experience with me over the years. I have learned a great deal from each of you and those insights provided the inspiration for this article. I hope that I have captured your experience well for others to grow as I have. I would especially like to thank the students who allowed me to share their thoughts and feelings in this article and all the students who supported the development and expansion of diversity training in this doctoral clinical training program.

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Euro-American students and a few (if any) students of color. This is especially true in programs with one identified course delegated with the responsibility of teaching diversity. When this course is required, the racial makeup of the class is likely to be reflective of the admission rates for students of color. If the class is an elective, there will likely be a diverse mix, and the students will generally be less resistant to the material. The purpose of this article is to focus on the experience of students of color who find themselves in these courses and the various ways they respond to this experience, as well as the various reactions of the faculty. These issues are discussed with the understanding that some behaviors of students of color are resistant. Suggestions are made to help the faculty understand these resistances and to develop appropriate responses for working through the resistance.

Psychology has many models for teaching diversity in clinical training programs. Scholars have debated the pros and cons of incorporating ethnic diversity issues into the curriculum for years. Proponents of training models that include diversity issues (Bronstein & Quina, 1988; Davis-Russell, 1990; Pederson, 1988; Sue et al., 1982) stress the importance of broadening the knowledge base of culture diversity issues and ethnic populations within the field of psychology. Sue et al. (1982) discussed the two myths within psychology that continue to be prevalent in the field today, 16 years later: (a) current knowledge and practice are adequate for the study and treatment of ethnic minority populations and (b) ethnic cultural issues are about only a small segment of the population, both within and outside the psychology field (cited in Davis-Russell, 1990).

In 1979 the American Psychological Association issued a resolution encouraging all psychology departments and schools of psychology to prepare students to function in a multicultural, multiracial society. In 1981, cross-cultural counseling competencies were developed to be incorporated into counselor training programs within psychology (Davis-Russell, 1990). The competencies included components of a training model developed by Pederson (1988) for a three-stage process including cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to work with multicultural and multiracial populations. Pederson cautioned that one can develop cultural competence only if one gives students an opportunity to go through all three stages. The importance of this training affects the quality of service delivery between psychologists and their prospective clients. Pinderhughes (1989) skillfully illustrated how culture mediates service delivery from the view of the practitioner; culture will define what practitioners see as a problem, how it is expressed, who can provide the help needed, and what treatment options will be considered. She stressed the importance of developing an awareness of one's own values, assumptions, and behaviors to facilitate empathic interactions with clients.

> Blocked receptivity and non-empathic interaction can be triggered by lack of familiarity and learned distortions. The anxiety mobilized by difference is reduced when one is aware of and can hold in check disabling attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. Awareness of one's attitudes and behavior becomes a critical component of preparation to remove barriers to effective cross-cultural interaction . . . and it requires an in-depth understanding of one's own cultural background and its meaning. (Pinderhughes, 1989, p. 20)

The process of learning to become culturally competent is a developmental path both students and faculty must aspire to travel. Therefore, we do not expect that every student will achieve the same level of awareness, knowledge, and skill at the same rate. Resistance impedes the process because students bring many different personal experiences and histories to the process. Some students of color experience a unique set of resistances in each stage of this process, either because of their own experience, or lack of experience, with racism, racial and biracial identity development, cultural and bicultural identity, acculturation issues, class, or religion. Because of the com-

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plexity of this developmental learning process, experiential courses and exercises are useful tools to guide students through it. Also, as in the therapy process, students will feel that they can risk traversing this path if a great deal of safety has first been established in the classroom.

Resistance in the classroom can interfere with the reciprocal communication between professors and students in a way similar to the interference of resistance with the therapeutic process. Weiner (1975) outlined several forms of resistance therapists are likely to confront in therapeutic encounters. I propose that a similar process is likely to unfold in courses where emotionally laden material is presented. These courses are likely to foster the following three forms of resistance in the classroom and therapy: character, content, and transference (Weiner, 1975). *Character resistance* describes a person's defensive style, coping style, and his or her general level of personality functioning. A person's defensive style may interfere with his or her ability to process anxiety-provoking information in class, which would result in resistant behavior. This behavior could be in the form of denial, isolation, reaction formation, or projection toward the faculty, other students in class, or both. Additionally, a student's coping style could be one of mastery, and he or she may appear to be very aggressive, taking on a leadership role in the class. Another coping style may be more passive, and the student will be quiet in class. The most important and misunderstood form of resistance often is expressed through the overall personality functioning of individuals in a classroom. All students bring histories with them, and these courses often interact with their past in painful ways. When these behaviors are not recognized as forms of coping and resistance, the underlying motivation for this behavior is often lost, along with an opportunity for empathic understanding.

Resistance to content is perhaps the most uncomfortable and complex form of resistance in these courses. If the course is required, the students who would normally avoid this material feel "trapped," and their resistance is often displayed in very obvious ways in class, for example, anger, resentment, avoidance, and silence. Another complex expression of this resistance is acted out by students who feel they are comfortable with and knowledgeable of the course content. Their resistance is triggered by the experiential component of these courses and the specific requirement to question their own experience regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender. This experience in the class will often evoke memories or experiences that make students avoid full participation in the pedagogical experience.

Transference resistance in these courses refers to both positive and negative reactions students have toward faculty that interfere with communication, trust, and learning. *Transference* generally refers to the experience patients have of their therapists, from positive to negative, resulting from displacements onto the therapist of important people in their lives. This transference experience will be influenced by the racial and ethnic identity development of students of color (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989; Comas-Díaz & Jacobsen, 1987; Cross, 1991; Parham, 1989; Parham & Helms, 1985).

Teaching multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills courses to multiethnic students is analogous to a cross-cultural psychotherapy experience; therefore, the transference experience for students will also be influenced by the race or ethnicity of the course instructor. Comas-Díaz and Jacobsen (1991) discussed this process, focusing on both intraethnic and interethnic dyads. They outlined how the transference experience could result in overcompliance and friendliness, denial of ethnicity, mistrust and hostility, or ambivalence in interethnic dyads. Intraethnic dyads could result in the therapist being experienced as omniscient–omnipotent, devalued, autoracist, or ambivalent. This ethnocultural transference phenomenon is also projected into the classroom experience, and this transference experience is acted out as transference resistance. Faculty who teach these courses all

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have stories of the extreme reactions they generate in one or two students in their classes. This reaction, like most transference reactions, often feels disorienting and misplaced to the faculty member.

The presence of these forms of resistance requires the faculty member to be aware and knowledgeable of his or her own multiple identities and skilled in group dynamics. If the professor has not developed cultural competency skills, students may experience harm or become very distrustful of multicultural issues and training. The importance of this material and the ethical mandate to train students to become culturally competent puts additional pressure on the field of mental health to hire and train faculty to become competent to teach these courses. When this has not been done, the following class experiences probably will not be understood or responded to appropriately.

Character Resistance: Avoidance

Students of color have stated that they often will be expected to know *all* the information, to have had *all* the experiences, and to understand *all* the issues of racism, as well as, if not better than, the professor teaching the course. They report that their feelings and experiences are misunderstood in class or that they are not allowed to express their feelings in response to the material, leaving them frustrated and angry. This is particularly true in courses that focus on awareness of racism and other forms of prejudice. This topic raises anxiety in most students and, if not handled in a sensitive and emphatic manner, it could develop into an interesting and painful split in the class. Students of color who are more comfortable discussing these issues may be less defensive and have less anxiety than the students who use a defensive style reminiscent of "character resistance" in response to their anxiety. Students who are attempting to cope with their anxiety may be experiencing more fear and anxiety about what may happen in class "here and now" than what they may have experienced in the past. Consequently, these students may avoid participating in the class discussions, appear detached from the affect expressed by other students of color, or generally appear distressed and confused. An Asian American student reacted to the silence in class in the following manner in her reaction paper:

> I observed that fear instills an avoidance response. I interpreted the silence all throughout class today as an avoidance response due to fear of creating further conflicts. I felt I had a different reason for my silence today. I merely wanted to step back from the forum . . . and observe how others reacted to my actions earlier today.

Another student responded to the class in the following manner:

> I'm the type that like to be unnoticed and not conspicuous anywhere whether I'm with my Caucasian or Asian friends. I guess if I stand out from the rest, I'm going to ultimately be judged and criticized and that is what I'm afraid of the most!

An East Indian student responded with

> I was particularly apprehensive before class today . . . . I kept thinking that some people were going to feel like they were being inundated with this "cultural stuff." . . . The fact that this type of response was elicited in me was just proof of all the unspoken rules that I have internalized. One of the major rules is not to push those in power too far.

It is important for the faculty to understand the nature of this behavioral resistance and not force these students to expose themselves in class. What is forgotten often by the faculty presenting this material in an interracial classroom is that this material can be just as anxiety provoking for students of color as it is for White students.

If the professor is not able to accept each student's experience as legitimate (because of his or her own problematic awareness of these issues), he or she will probably identify either with the group that is comfortable discussing racism or with the students who are

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more resistant and not as comfortable. This is particularly problematic for faculty members who have not explored their own cultural and racial identities and awareness issues and who may not be consciously aware of their own strategy for coping with racism. This parallel process of having to cope with anxiety-provoking material is why faculty members should be open to exploring their own process before teaching these courses. Consulting with colleagues is particularly helpful at this stage if the faculty member is having a difficult time managing his or her own anxiety in class. Faculty behavior often sets the stage for the development of transference resistance, discussed below, to develop between students of color and the faculty. This does not preclude what is happening between the professor and the other students in the class.

Transference Resistance

Comas-Díaz and Jacobsen (1987) illustrated how ethnocultural clients project ethnocultural characteristics onto their therapists and how that process has definite transference consequences. Teaching multicultural issues in classes that are ethnically diverse will have the same if not a similar result. Ethnic, racial, and culturally different instructors and students may share similar historical experiences, but the level of understanding of these experiences and the coping strategies used are assumed to be different. The faculty member is expected to be better prepared to cope with the stress and anxiety that often get stirred up in these courses, but he or she may be caught off guard by the level of projection coming from students because of transference resistance.

The challenge of teaching cultural knowledge is as difficult and fraught with problems for both faculty and students as is teaching cultural awareness. Euro-American instructors often complain that they just do not have enough time to find all the information that they would need to teach these courses. Departments with special-focus courses on particular ethnic groups are usually taught by faculty of color, and the faculty may believe that therefore other faculty have no need to learn how to teach this material. What is implicit in this is the belief that faculty of color are experts and that they will not have to spend extra time preparing to teach these courses. This belief system illustrates a parallel process that occurs in the classroom between Euro-American faculty and students of color. Students will be expected to teach the class and share all the cultural knowledge they have about their own group or other groups. Instructors are ignoring the knowledge base that informs us of the heterogeneity within and between cultural and racial groups. A student who shares his or her experiences and knowledge may in fact be sharing his or her own unique family and community experience. However, it is the responsibility of the faculty to provide the information needed to fulfill this demand of teaching. This experience was explored in a reaction paper written by a Latina student:

> At the doctoral program I previously attended, cross-cultural issues were addressed as a mandate. Consequently, almost everything I heard from professors was not "genuine." With this in mind, I was a little skeptical about the content of this class. My skepticism was eased when I saw that [the professor] was black. I guess this reflects my own bias in thinking that only a person of color can give this issue the importance it deserves and the richness that it can bring.

The student's transference resistance often colludes with character resistance. Some students may experience professors as hostile or ambivalent, depending on the student's history of dealing directly with these issues. Students of color may project their own negative stereotypes about class and color onto the faculty member and experience him or her through these projections. Euro-American students are also likely to project negative stereotypes onto the faculty

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member if they feel unsafe in class. These projections can result in a complex combination of experiences for the professor to negotiate as a result of inter- and intraracial transference resistance (Comas-Díaz & Jacobsen, 1987). This of course prevents the faculty member from being experienced as too "powerful" and "knowing" by the students, and any attempt to clarify information or point out stereotyped information is usually met with extreme anger or contempt. Students have a difficult time trusting a faculty member who appears to be even-handed with all students in the class. This is especially true for faculty of color, who are expected to take sides with the students of color and to have no empathy for White students. The struggle to develop trust in the class is where transference resistance is the most likely to be displayed. For example, some students of color have a difficult time with faculty of color who challenge them and their understanding of the dynamics of racism and prejudice in class. The transference resistance in this instance keeps the focus on the faculty person, and the student avoids having to explore the anxiety that he or she may feel about the topic under discussion. Overidentifying with the faculty person is another way to avoid exploring the student's own underlying anxiety, but this comfortable stance is often met with extreme anger when the student feels betrayed by the faculty. For example, when the student uses overidentification as a means of transference resistance, the faculty person is in a double bind and cannot behave in an unexpected manner. This means the faculty person cannot challenge the students' perceptions of themselves or of the professor.

Faculty who have been in these situations report being verbally attacked by students and having students act out by not turning in assignments and giving faculty poor evaluations. It should also be pointed out that character resistance and the form it takes will give faculty members some idea of the type of transference resistance they may expect to see in their classes.

The third and final form of resistance explored in this article is *resistance to content.* This form of resistance is another coping strategy students may use in response to their anxiety.

Resistance to Content

Denial of Differences

Some students of color are very uncomfortable discussing issues related to racial and cultural identities in such a public arena. Students who do discuss these issues run the risk of exposing themselves to hostile judgments. The experience is especially risky for students with low self-esteem and those who are struggling with racial identity or acculturation issues. Examples of this conflict were expressed in the following reaction papers. An African American man wrote that

> the anxiety that I experience is related to the fact that this topic forces me to see and experience my "differentness." A differentness that I feel and experience everyday of my life, but that is not discussed or is minimized for the most part by the majority culture. . . . Associated with the anxiety for this feeling of differentness is also anger.

Another student of color wrote, "It is very difficult to diplomatically tell a white person who is claiming that we are all Americans that their American is not necessarily the American for someone who is of color." An Indian American student wrote about the double bind a person of color experiences in America:

> Being American has been a struggle for me. On the one sense being an American denies and devalues your ethnic identity, because it's not an encompassing term. On the other hand, it gives you a sense of belonging to the U.S. . . . While Americans still ask me about culture in "my country" meaning India. I get mad, because they assume I'm foreign based on skin color. It also means that I don't belong in this country—where I was born and raised.

When the faculty lack this level of under-

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standing they cannot help students of color who are struggling with issues related to cultural and racial identity. Identity development issues may get acted out in the classroom within ethnic groups and between ethnic groups and international students regarding issues of race, color, and gender in the United States. These students often feel pressure either from faculty or other students to identify themselves as an ethnic minority. The fact that this may create some very uncomfortable feelings for these students is usually not processed as important information for the class to understand. Again, if the faculty person is not knowledgeable of these issues or of group dynamics, he or she may collude with students and will likely have a difficult time managing various student anxieties while processing this material.

Silence

There are common behavior patterns exhibited by students of color in these courses, including sizing up the faculty person to estimate some measure of safety and aligning themselves with other students, developing a safety net. In a recent clinical graduate course, students were given an opportunity to discuss racial and cultural issues they felt were present when working interculturally. The response was a deafening silence from the African American students in the classroom. The students had been provided with reading material to give them a framework to understand this experience plus clinical examples from the experience of the faculty member. It was surprising that, when they wrote the papers, these students had plenty to say about this issue. Later (outside of class), I asked why they uniformly chose to remain silent in the class but expressed themselves in their papers. They suggested that in other courses this material was not safe to discuss. In fact, students said that they had been attacked and ridiculed by other students. It is entirely conceivable that the faculty teaching these other courses would be unaware that African American students felt this way. Furthermore, it is also believable that African American students would feel offended and attacked by statements that others would not experience as threatening at all. This form of collective resistance is probably overlooked by other faculty, and the opportunity to develop safety and learn from its experience is often missed. Consequently, the students lose an opportunity to fully participate in the learning process.

Dealing Directly With Resistance

It is my opinion that dealing with resistance in the classroom requires knowledge and experience of process issues as well as the use of empathy. Resistance is not necessarily behavior that needs to be avoided or prevented from developing. Instead, the faculty should see resistant behavior as a normal process students will experience when confronted with course material that is uncomfortable. Students of color are more vulnerable to being caught in a double bind in these courses than are other students. Ethnic–cultural students often feel that they have the responsibility to speak for their particular race, and they experience doubt and anxiety about doing so. Faculty of color are similarly caught in a double bind, because they (like students of color) know there is an assumption that they will know all of this information and will able to teach it without additional training. Euro-American faculty members have many resistant responses that generally mirror the position of the institutions where they are employed. Without institutional support for this training, some Euro-American professors will generally not see the need for them to obtain additional training and knowledge to teach these courses. The overall goal all professors need to keep in mind when dealing with the various forms of resistance in the classroom is to avoid the trap of pathologizing and blaming students.

Dealing with character resistance requires special sensitivity to issues of students'

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vulnerability and the need for faculty to respect those feelings. It is reasonable to assume that ethnic–cultural students have already developed various ways of defending themselves from racial assaults. Students will defend themselves against racial assaults or perceived assaults in response to the level of risk of humiliation they perceive. Discussing this material in the classroom may make them feel like they are being exposed to an assault; moreover, for others, it may be the first time they have discussed these issues publicly outside their own racial–ethnic group. We can reasonably expect at least three different responses from these students: fear, anger, or both. The intent should never be to create this powerful and painful experience but to recognize it and process it in a way that students learn from the experience. Discussions about the power dynamics of oppression and in-group and out-group exercises would be helpful in teaching students to empathize with this experience. Exercises in which the students discuss the emotional responses to power, oppression, and victimization also would be helpful.

Transference resistance can be very subtle and difficult to detect when students either idealize or overidentify with their professors. This often results in the faculty feeling flattered and colluding with the students and thereby not challenging the students in class. This experience is similar to that of projective identification, and the faculty member, without realizing it, is either attacking some group of students or protecting another group. Faculty need to understand that the feelings motivating the transference are fear and anxiety. Serving as a good role model will help students to understand that this material can be presented in the class without pathologizing, stereotyping, or blaming. When the transference is negative, the faculty person cannot do anything right. Students will feel very unsafe in class and will act this out, often attacking each other and the faculty. Again, this is a rich opportunity to process the classroom dynamics in the context of power and oppression. Discussing this transference reaction as resistance and helping students to understand the group dynamics can be very powerful. This must be done empathically, without blaming.

Dealing with resistance to content requires special awareness and knowledge of the various groups or populations under discussion. The most common response to this form of resistance is the denial of difference. The need for sameness and pseudo-equality avoids learning about the experience of people who are different and how difference is not valued in our society. This form of resistance, if not confronted, reinforces the possibility that students will engage in inappropriate stereotypic behavior with clients who are different. Exercises, role playing, and the use of films that reinforce the notion that people are different are useful tools. Role plays using Pedersen's (1977) the "anti-counselor" will help students understand differences from the client's perspective. In this model, the "anti-counselor" acts out the implicit thoughts and feelings of the culturally different client. This gives the counselor an opportunity to gain insight into the cultural resistance present in cross-counseling dyads. The exercise, "your first experience of feeling different," also is a useful experience that focuses on feelings about being different. Any information or experience that teaches students about stereotyping also would be of benefit in dealing with this aspect of resistance.

Finally, faculty members should regularly consult with colleagues to help maintain objectivity when teaching these courses. Having group meetings to discuss issues that come up in class and appropriate ways to deal with these issues without acting out toward students is helpful. These courses are emotionally draining for the faculty to teach, and institutional and collegial support help to maintain integrity in the courses and the faculty who teach them.

Strategies for Change

The classroom environment is often limited to experiences that are didactic and require

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passive learning by the student. In courses that use experiential approaches, an active learning process is reinforced, and this results in a dynamic experience for both faculty and students. Teaching in graduate clinical programs has many advantages: (a) the students are adults, (b) they have life experiences on which to draw, and (c) they are generally motivated to learn and to explore their personal and professional development. Resistance presents an opportunity for growth and development for both individuals and groups of students. Resistance should alert the faculty member that he or she has mobilized defenses and that empathy and sensitivity will be needed to deal with the resistant behaviors. In an academic environment, the goal is not to remove or avoid the resistance but to use it to enhance the students' learning.

Students should be expected to initially be resistant in these courses. Issues of race and culture are topics people feel uncomfortable discussing overall and, in particular, in classes.

Suggestions

1. Faculty should provide support and structure in the course to help students deal with their initial anxiety. This could be accomplished by having students agree to stick to confidential agreements designed by the class at the beginning of the course. Students would have the opportunity to set the boundaries around experiences that would be appropriate for discussion outside the classroom.
2. Students need to be reassured that they will not be evaluated on "political correctness," which may create a socially desirable response bias in the classroom. Students should be reassured that the experiences in the class will facilitate growth only if they are genuine and honest. Using structured experiential exercises will give students an opportunity to explore difficult material.
3. Students should not be forced to participate in (public) experiences in the class that they feel are too uncomfortable. (Nevertheless, faculty should try to develop a safe environment and encourage all students to participate.)
4. Students should have an opportunity to express their feelings and reactions to the class safely. Ungraded reaction papers and journals are some good vehicles for this process.

Courses that start off developing trust and setting clear boundaries and expectations will be more successful.

1. Courses should start focusing on helping students to develop an awareness of their own issues and reactions to this material. When this focus is made empathically, a parallel can be drawn to help students understand their clients' or colleagues' feelings who are different.
2. General courses in diversity should be broad in content and not focus exclusively on race or gender. A broader context focusing on oppression and power would help students to understand the dynamics in multiple contexts and to be better able to identify people's complex experiences with oppression.
3. A team building, group dynamic, supportive approach would ease students' hearing and learning about topics that might be uncomfortable to hear in another context.
4. Course requirements should expect realistic changes in students' attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors for a passing grade. The course should be seen as a developmental process, and students should be allowed to develop at their own pace.
5. Students should not be expected to teach this course or to be the primary source of data for the course.

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