School Psychologists' Self-Perceptions of Multicultural Competence: The Relevance of Experience and Training

Jacquelyn B. Wright, Kevin J. Filter, Julene D. Nolan, and Sarah Sifers
Minnesota State University

Abstract: A national survey of 216 school psychologists' perceptions of multicultural competence indicated that multicultural competence significantly increases as a function of with hours of training and frequency of experience working with individuals from cultures different from their own. Results are discussed in the context of measurement limitations for multicultural competence and implications for trainers of school psychologists.

School psychologists have a responsibility to become multiculturally competent in order to best serve the diverse range of students present in the educational systems today (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1991; Rogers & Lopez, 2002). One of the difficulties with fulfilling this obligation has been the lack of tools to measure multicultural competence in the practice of school psychology. In the absence of well-researched instruments specific to school psychologists, researchers must rely on the tools developed by the field of counseling psychology, not simply because they are available, but also because they measure counseling skills, a critical skill set in practice of competent school psychologists.

For school psychologists, multicultural competence encompasses skills related to knowledge and understanding of culture, effective practice with and appreciation for diverse groups. Further, it includes incorporation of assessment and communication methods that minimize cultural bias and are sensitive to cultural issues (Malone, 2010). Ortiz, Flanagan, and Dynda (2008) add that multiculturally competent school psychologists can recognize when and where cultural factors may influence the delivery of services. In counseling psychology, multicultural competence has been described as a three-part construct including cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural skills (Sue, 2006). Additionally, Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, and Parham (2008) maintain that multicultural competence also includes the ability to recognize changes in populations and adapt to new challenges that occur over time.

Effects of Training and Experience

For many, multicultural competence begins in graduate training experiences (D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991; Holcomb-McCoy, 2005) and continues through professional development. For example, school psychologists may first be exposed to multicultural competence issues through coursework, practica or internship experience.

They may choose to increase their multicultural competence by selecting professional development opportunities to boost deficiencies, learn from peers, or supervise other school psychologists (Armistead, 2008; Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda, 2008; Rogers 2006). Similarly, for counseling psychologists, competence is dependent on training experience along with continued professional development.

Academic training, clinical or practical experience, racial identity, and demographics have each been indicated as contributing factors to the perception and development of multicultural competence. Several studies in counseling psychology have examined these factors from different perspectives and have contributed to the understanding of how multicultural competence is developed. For instance, aspects of academic training have been identified as indicators of perceived multicultural competence. D'Andrea and colleagues (1991) compared three classes that covered the same material in different time frames to see if the length of multicultural counseling courses affected perceptions of competence. Prior to the course, students were given a survey to measure the students' perceptions of their own multicultural counseling awareness, knowledge, and skills. Upon obtaining post-test results, students from all three courses increased their perceptions of multicultural counseling awareness, knowledge, and skills. Therefore, the authors suggested multicultural counseling awareness, knowledge, and skills can be improved regardless of class length.

Holcomb-McCoy's (2005) study expanded these results by indicating a multicultural counseling class can contribute to perceived multicultural competence. Based on a national sample of school counselors, results from survey data indicated that school counselors who had taken a multicultural course scored higher on a multicultural knowledge indicator and could define more multicultural terminology. These results support earlier findings reported by D'Andrea et al. (1991). D'Andrea et al. found that multicultural course work increased participants' ratings of multicultural awareness and knowledge, but less so for skills. This is an indication that variables either in addition to the classroom or outside of the classroom are likely important to develop multicultural competence.

Direct multicultural contact has also been indicated as an important factor in the development of multicultural competence. Research from Allison, Echemendia, Crawford, and Robinson (1996) emphasizes this position. Survey data from clinical and counseling psychologists revealed that psychologists rated themselves as multiculturally competent in serving particular cultural groups if they had gained experience with those specific cultural groups during training. Furthermore, they were more likely to continue to serve those populations after graduation. Results also revealed that perceptions of multicultural

competence increased with the number of diverse clients on a practicing psychologist's current caseload (Allison et al., 1996).

Perceptions of multicultural competence may differ, however, depending on the type of training program. In a comparison study of self-reported multicultural competence between clinical and counseling graduate students, counseling psychology students had higher self-perceptions of multicultural competence than clinical psychology students (Pope-Davis, Reynolds, Dings, & Nielson, 1995). Students were given the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI; Sodowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994) to measure perceptions of multicultural competence. Counseling psychology students reported increased MCI Knowledge and Awareness subscale scores attributable to exposure to individuals with culturally diverse backgrounds. Clinical psychology students reported increased MCI Knowledge and Awareness subscale scores attributable to multicultural courses and supervision (Pope-Davis et al., 1995). Despite the differences between the counseling and clinical groups, results of the study suggest that both experience and training are valuable contributors to perceived multicultural competence.

Less convincing is the evidence suggesting that demographic variables contribute to perceived multicultural competence. Two studies conducted in the 1990s found that gender was a significant factor in racial attitudes. In a sample of undergraduate students at a Midwestern university, women reported being more comfortable with racial differences than men (Carter, 1990). The same result was confirmed by Pope-Davis and Ottavi (1994) in a replication study using the same measurement tools conducted at a different Midwestern university. However, later evidence refutes these finding. Holcomb-McCoy (2005) investigated many demographic variables thought to contribute to perceived multicultural competence. Results from this study indicated that gender, school setting, and years of experience were not significantly related to perceptions of multicultural competence.

Although the bulk of data regarding multicultural competence exists in the counseling psychology domain, contributions from school psychology research continue to grow. The goal of one such study by Lopez and Rogers (2001) was to identify cross-cultural school psychology competencies that experts regard as important for working with multicultural populations. The most critical area was assessment, which included assessment performance, assessment results, and assessment interpretation. Other important areas included consultation, language, professional characteristics, and report writing. A second study researched training experiences among school psychologists (Loe & Miranda, 2005). Survey respondents were from a pool of members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and results indicated that 90.7% were able to receive diversity

education through continuing education credits, internships, or through graduate courses. These experiences generally were rated favorably, but there was demand for more experiences with direct exposure to diverse groups specific to their particular geographic location.

It is currently both valuable and necessary for the disciplines of counseling and school psychology to inform each other. However, it is equally necessary for researchers in school psychology to develop their own tools to measure multicultural competence in school psychology. The present study builds upon the existing literature base, which was derived primarily from counseling psychology but informed by school psychology, by focusing on frequency of experiences with diverse populations, hours of academic training, and gender as factors predicting school psychologists' perceptions of their own multicultural competence.

Hypotheses

For this study it was hypothesized that higher frequency of experiences with multicultural populations would yield increased perception of multicultural competence. Second, frequency of experience with multicultural populations was hypothesized to be more predictive of perceived multicultural competence than hours of trainings/workshops. Third, it was hypothesized that school psychologists who work in urban settings would perceive themselves as more multiculturally competent than those who work in suburban or rural settings because professionals who work in urban settings may have more direct experiences with diverse populations. Finally, based on emerging but inconclusive evidence from the research literature, women were hypothesized to perceive themselves to be more multiculturally competent than men.

Method

Participants

NASP authorized the use of their mailing list for the purpose of sending a survey packet via mail to 1000 currently practicing school psychologists in the United States. Of the 216 participants who returned surveys, 17.6% were men and 82.4% were women. Respondents ranged in age from 25 to 68 years old ($M = 43.41$, $SD = 11.15$) and had been practicing between 1 and 40 years ($M = 13.48$, $SD = 9.43$). The sample represented different ethnic backgrounds including 93.1% White, 4.2% reported two or more races, 1.9% were Black, 0.5% were Asian, and 0.5% were Hispanic or Latino. The majority of school psychologists worked in suburban settings (N = 103) followed by rural (N = 53) and urban settings (N = 50). The sample included respondents from 41 different states. In descending order, responses were highest from the following states: New York (N = 20), Massachusetts

(N = 13), California (N = 12), Ohio (N = 12), Florida (N = 10), Michigan (N = 9), Minnesota (N = 9), Washington (N = 9), Arizona (N = 8), and Virginia (N = 8). The percentage of women and Caucasians in the current study is very similar to the national data for members of the National Association of School Psychologists. According to the National Association of School Psychologists report, 77% of their members are women and 97% of their members are Caucasian (InFocus, 2008).

Measures

Before the survey packet was assembled for the current study, a pilot study was conducted in Minnesota investigating professional practices, job satisfaction, and job barriers (Fenicle & Filter, 2007). The current national survey was a reproduction of the Minnesota survey packet with additional questions regarding demographic information, job satisfaction, actual versus desired professional activities, barriers to preferred practice, diversity workshop/trainings, and multicultural competence. The current study focused on the data gathered from demographic information and the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (Sodowsky et al., 1994).

Demographic Information. Demographic questions included: age, gender, years as a practicing school psychologist, degree earned, and primary practice setting. Multicultural experience questions included: percentage of time spent with specified races, frequency of contact with other races in the workplace, frequency of experiences with other cultures, and pre-service and in-service workshop attendance. It should be noted that frequency of experiences with other cultures was coded as daily, weekly, monthly, four to six times per year, one to three times per year, and once per year or less.

Multicultural Counseling Inventory. The MCI was developed by Sodowsky and colleagues (1994) to measure counselors' self-perceptions of multicultural competence. It is comprised of 40 items on a four-point Likert-type scale with three additional short answer questions for the participant to comment on their strengths and weaknesses and give feedback about the measure. The current study did not include the three additional questions. The 40 items were all formatted in the same manner; participants were asked to respond to each question by indicating "how accurately each describes you when working in a multicultural counseling situation" (Sodowsky et al., 1994). The MCI is broken into four subscales: skills, awareness, relationship, and knowledge. These subscales were derived using factor analysis and have relatively strong internal consistency ($\Box$ = .81 for skills, $\Box$ = .80 for awareness, $\Box$ = .67 for relationship, and $\Box$ = .80 for knowledge). The skills subscale is 11 items, the awareness subscale is 10 items, the relationship subscale is 8 items, and the knowledge subscale is 11 items.

The skills subscale measures general skills that would be used during multicultural counseling sessions. The awareness subscale measures general understanding of barriers, legal issues, and challenges minority groups face. It also measures advocacy and multicultural interaction both professionally and in one's personal life. The relationship subscale measures the comfort level of working with minorities and the ability to dismiss stereotypes or preconceived notions while in therapy. Finally, the knowledge subscale measures background knowledge of cultures and a professional's commitment to keep up on the latest research and preferences regarding certain cultures when planning treatments (Sodowsky et al., 1994).

In a review of the measure, Pope-Davis and Dings (1994) reported that the MCI was written in behavioral terms that made it easier to describe how one counsels. According to Sodowsky et al. (1994), the items were developed with behavioral language based on the literature and to increase content validity.

Procedure

Survey packets were assembled and mailed to practicing school psychologists using a mailing list of randomly selected members of the National Association for School Psychologists. Accompanying the survey was informed consent information, an addressed return envelope, and application for a drawing to win one of 250 $10 Target gift cards. Upon receipt of completed packets, the researcher removed the survey and gift card application and placed them in separate locations to protect the anonymity of respondents. The survey took approximately 45 minutes to complete and one reminder was sent to each of the 1000 school psychologists to boost the rate of responding. The drawing was completed approximately six weeks after the deadline for survey completion and all respondents who completed a gift card application received one. After initial data entry using SPSS was completed, a data entry reliability check of 10% of the data revealed over 99% accuracy in data entry. All non-congruencies discovered in this process were corrected after reviewing the original survey responses.

Results

A correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between total scores on the MCI, MCI subscales, demographic variables, hours of training, and frequency of experience. Results indicate a significant, positive relationship between frequency of experience and total MCI scores (see Table 1). There was also a significant positive relationship between in-service hours of training and total MCI scores. The variables pre-service and in-service hours of training were combined to create the total hours of training variable which was also significantly and positively related to MCI scores. It is interesting

to note that the MCI awareness subscale had a significant, positive relationship with both experience and total hours of training. The MCI knowledge subscale had a significant, positive relationship only with in-service hours. No significant relationships were indicated between MCI scores and gender, or MCI scores and location of school (urban, suburban, or rural). There was no significant correlation between skills or relationship subscales and any of the training, experience, or demographic factors.

Table 1

Intercorrelations between predictor variables, total MCI scores, and MCI subscale scores

	Total MCI	MCI Skills Subscale	MCI Awareness Subscale	MCI Relationship Subscale	MCI Knowledge Subscale
Pre-Service Training	0.10	0.11	0.15*	-0.11	0.75
In-Service Training	0.30**	0.12	0.24**	.08	0.20*
Total Training Hours	0.22**	0.14	0.31**	-0.10	0.14
Freq. of Experience	0.25**	0.07	0.50**	0.08	0.10
Gender	-0.02	-0.06	0.03	0.08	-0.08
Location of school	-0.28	0.11	-0.23	0.12	0.06

Note: *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

A multiple regression analysis was conducted using the total MCI scores as the criterion and pre-service hours of training, in-service hours of training and experience as the predictors. This produced a significant predictive model, $F= 6.53$, $p< .001$, $R^2 = .114$. Results indicate that in-service hours of training and experience were significant predictors but pre-service training hours was not. Findings are represented in Table 2.

Table 2

Multiple regression analysis of pre-service hours, in-service hours, and experience as predictors

for total MCI scores

Variable	B	SE B	β
Pre-Service Hours	0.61	0.52	0.09
In-Service Hours	0.76	0.27	0.22**
Experience	2.22	0.83	0.21**

Note. **$p < .01$

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. The pre-service and in-service hours of training were combined to compare total hours of training to frequency of experiences. By creating a variable that represented total hours of training, the viability of the second hypothesis could be determined. The purpose of this analysis was to determine if there was an interaction between training and experience in predicting total MCI scores. In this analysis, hours of pre-service training and hours of in-service training were combined into one training variable to represent the total hours of training. In step one of the hierarchical regression, total MCI scores served as the criterion and training and experience served as predictors. The regression was run with the same criterion and predictors as in step one, with the addition of an interaction variable created from the two predictors. Results indicate that in step one both predictors were significant with experience explaining more of the variability in MCI scores than training (see Table 3). The interaction term in step two was not significant. The current findings show that both training and experience are significant in predicting total MCI scores separately, but that they do not interact in predicting total MCI scores.

Table 3

Hierarchical regression analysis for predicting MCI total scores

Variable	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
Training	0.82	0.36	0.18*
Experience	2.30	0.84	0.21**
Step 2			
Training	-0.64	1.65	-0.14
Experience	1.45	1.26	0.14
Training X Experience	0.27	0.30	0.35

Note. $R^2 = 0.13$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = 0.006$.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Discussion

Results of the present study indicate that the central contributing factors to perceived multicultural competence were frequency of experience with other cultures and training. High frequency of experience was significantly correlated with higher perceptions of multicultural competence. This result supported the first hypothesis. More important, however, results from the hierarchical regression show that frequency of experience predicts more variability in self-reports of cultural competence than hours of training. Therefore, the second hypothesis was supported, although it should be noted that both variables significantly predicted perceived multicultural competence and the difference of significance between the two was quite minimal.

The findings of the present study are similar to the results of Pope-Davis et al.'s (1995) study in which training and experience of counseling and clinical psychology students were found to contribute to perceptions of multicultural competence. A possible reason that frequency of experience and hours of training were minimally different was because the questionnaire did not have a specific definition for "training." Since "training" could have included any number of educational experiences, it is not possible to determine the types of training that contributed the most to perceptions of multicultural competence.

Another interesting result of the study emerged from the analysis of the MCI subscales. The awareness and knowledge subscales from the MCI were the only subscales to have significant correlations with either the experience or training variables respectively. These results may suggest that knowledge and awareness competencies are strengthened by increased contact with individuals from diverse backgrounds and by supervision and multicultural courses (Pope-Davis et al., 1995). However, Holcomb-McCoy (2005) found that multicultural course work did not affect multicultural awareness, which contrasts with the findings of Pope-Davis et al. (1995) but is consistent with the current study. Therefore, other variables in addition to or apart from multicultural coursework may contribute to the development of multicultural awareness.

Perceptions of multicultural competence are related to experience and training, however results indicate that demographic factors such as location of the school and gender were not correlated with perceptions of multicultural competence. Consequently, the third and fourth hypotheses were rejected. Despite a past literature finding mixed results regarding gender and multicultural competence, the current study is consistent with other research using the MCI (Ottavi et al., 1994; Pope-Davis et al., 1995) and a different measure (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005) that showed gender is an insignificant predictor of multicultural competence. Geographic location might not be a significant predictor as school psychologists in different settings (urban, suburban, and rural) may not actually differ in their training and experiences with different populations, which do predict multicultural competence.

Overall, the results of this study imply that school psychologists benefit from both training and multicultural experiences in their development of multicultural competence. School psychology programs need to provide training and experiences with the goal of creating school psychologists who are competent, culturally sensitive, knowledgeable, and effective when working with individuals from different cultures (Gopaul-Mcnicol, 1997). Several researchers have commented on what contributes to a proper training program for school psychologists (Loe & Miranda, 2005; Rogers, 2006; Rogers & Lopez, 2002; Rogers, Ponterotto, Conoley, & Wise, 1992). They agree that the practicum period is an essential complement to classroom training. Practicum opportunities allow school psychologists to combine coursework with actual situations in the schools, which contribute developing confidence and multicultural competence (Loe & Miranda, 2005). The results of this study suggest that practicum experiences that include both educational and experiential components can be useful in increasing cultural competence.

Although the practicum is useful for training new school psychologists, it is also essential that practicing school psychologists participate in professional development opportunities related to multicultural competence. Engaging in continuing professional development is important because it is easy to lose competence quickly, especially because many school psychologists practice in isolation (Armistead, 2008). Unfortunately, if school psychologists do not continually seek opportunities to hone their skills, they are more likely to revert to their preexisting notions (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002).

Limitations

Although measuring self-perceptions of multicultural competence provide valuable insight into the probable skill level of school psychologists, there is no evidence that perception of multicultural competence translates into practice or produces better outcomes for diverse students. According to Constantine and Ladany (2000), the relationship between self-report measures of multicultural competence and demonstrated competence has not yet been established. Therefore, caution should be taken when considering the type of information self-report measures provide. Self-report measures can also be interpreted differently than the author intended according to anticipated behaviors rather than actual, current behaviors. However, as Pope-Davis et al. (1995) point out, despite the limitations, without the use of self-report measures a multi-state sample could not have been readily collected. Further research must be done to develop a tool that accurately measures multicultural competence in practice.

Additionally, the present study used the Multicultural Counseling Inventory. The creators of the inventory (Sodowsky, et al., 1994) designed it for use with professionals who primarily utilize counseling techniques. Due to the nature of school psychology, school psychologists typically do not spend the majority of their time counseling individuals. Therefore, it is possible that results would be different if an inventory gauging cultural competence that was tailored to the occupation of school psychology was available.

Future Research

Analysis of the data in the current study showed that experience and training were not significantly correlated with either the skills or the relationship subscales on the MCI. It would be interesting to conduct future research that focuses on factors that would strengthen school psychologists' multicultural skills and relationships. More research is also warranted to study the transition between classroom training and experiences. Both types of education, procedural and experiential, seem very important as contributors to multicultural competence. Therefore, future research could continue to focus on what constitutes the best types of procedural and experiential training. Other researchers have

spoken to this need as well because although it is well understood that training is important, the precise elements of training which are most effective in developing multicultural competence have not been determined (Rogers, 2006). Finally, the true measure of multicultural competence is the ability to effectively work with individuals from other backgrounds. Valuable information could be gleaned from individuals who receive services delivered by school psychologists by measuring what skills and behaviors they deem socially valid. Hence, future research should consider including consumer perceptions in addition to psychologist reports.

Conclusion

Professionals and researchers alike recognize the importance of multicultural competence and are continuing to develop an understanding of the role of procedural and experiential education in multicultural competence (Dickson & Jepsen, 2007). Results of the current study support this assumption. As such, it is necessary for school psychology training programs to provide in-class trainings that are transferable to assigned practica. Under the proper supervision, students will have plenty of opportunities to practice their skills, work sensitively and effectively and even make mistakes while in a safe environment (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). Ideally, upon completion of these opportunities, school psychologists entering the field will possess multicultural competencies as well as perceive themselves as multiculturally competent. Furthermore, the hypothesis that it is necessary for school psychologists to continue to enhance their multicultural competence through professional development is supported by this study and others like it. School psychologists who seek out opportunities to develop multicultural competence will be better positioned to adapt to the constant shifts in cultural trends and will be more sensitive to cultural differences when working with diverse populations (Ortiz et. al, 2008).

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