

THE IMPACT OF A SERVICE-LEARNING STUDY ABROAD TRIP ON SOCIAL JUSTICE  
ADVOCACY IN COUNSELORS-IN-TRAINING: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of  
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In Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

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## ABSTRACT

Though there has been extensive research into the benefits of using international cultural immersion experiences to enhance the development of multicultural competence of counselors in training, limited research has been conducted to specifically examine the effect of the service-learning component of a study abroad trip on students' multicultural and social justice competencies. Given that social justice advocacy is an integral aspect of multicultural competence, it is important to understand how students assimilate the social justice advocacy experiences gained during their service-learning trip once they return home. To this end, a qualitative thematic analysis design was used to identify themes related to master's-level counseling students' experiences in-country and their return home from a 4-week study abroad cultural immersion trip. Interviews were conducted to answer the research question, which led to four sets of themes: in-country experiences, reentry experiences, multicultural and social justice competency, and impact over time. The emergent themes were consistent with previous research. The implications of these themes in the use of service-learning experiences on the training of counselors and recommendations for future research include the impact of in country experiences, impact of reentry, impact on multicultural and social justice competence, and impact over time.

*Keywords:* Multicultural competency, study abroad, service-learning, counselor education

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM .....	1
Multicultural Counseling .....	1
Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies .....	2
Social Justice .....	3
Multicultural Competency in Counselor Education .....	5
Service-Learning .....	6
Re-entry .....	9
Statement of the Problem .....	10
Purpose of the Study .....	11
Research Question .....	12
Significance of the Study .....	12
Chapter Summary .....	12
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	13
History of Multicultural Competency .....	13
Multicultural Development in Study Abroad Experiences .....	16
Attitudes and Beliefs .....	17
Re-Entry .....	21
Counselor Educators .....	24
Religion and Spirituality .....	25

Recommendations for Counselor Educator Study Abroad Trips .....	25
Chapter Summary .....	26
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS .....	28
Research Purpose .....	28
Research Question .....	28
Research Design .....	28
Selection of Participants .....	30
Role of the Researcher .....	30
Research Procedure .....	31
Preparing to Collect Data .....	31
Process of Thematic Analysis .....	32
Step 1: Become Familiar with the Data .....	32
Step 2: Generate Initial Codes .....	33
Step 3: Search for Themes .....	33
Step 4: Reviewing Themes .....	33
Step 5: Define and Name the Themes .....	33
Step 6: Write up Findings .....	33
Verification Procedures .....	34
Ethical Considerations .....	34
Summary .....	35
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS .....	36
Research Purpose .....	36

Sample .....	36
Research Methodology Applied to Data Analysis .....	37
Data Analysis .....	38
Emergent Themes .....	39
Theme 1: Impact of In-Country Experiences .....	39
Subtheme 1.1: Impact of the Culture .....	40
Subtheme 1.1.1: Respect for Cultural Differences .....	40
Subtheme 1.1.2: Class Differences .....	41
Subtheme 1.1.3: Two Extremes.....	41
Subtheme 1.1.4: Awareness of Economic Privilege .....	42
Subtheme 1.2: The Impact of the Group .....	43
Subtheme 1.2.1: Team Unity .....	43
Subtheme 1.2.1: Unresolved conflicts .....	43
Subtheme 1.2.3: Self-care .....	44
Theme 2: The Impact of Reentry .....	44
Subtheme 2.1: Lack of Closure .....	44
Subtheme 2.2: Reverse Culture Shock .....	45
Subtheme 2.3: Back to Work .....	46
Subtheme 2.4: Feeling Isolated .....	46
Theme 3: The Impact on Multicultural and Social Justice Competence .....	47
Subtheme 3.1: Impact on Counseling.....	48
Subtheme 3.1.1: Professional Impact .....	48

Subtheme 3.1.2: Increased Self-Confidence .....	49
Subtheme 3.1.3: Increased Advocacy .....	50
Subtheme 3.1.4: Impact of Historical Context .....	51
Subtheme 3.2: Impact on the Individual .....	52
Subtheme 3.2.1: Economic Privilege .....	52
Subtheme 3.2.2: Existential Reevaluation .....	52
Subtheme 3.2.3: Challenging Assumptions .....	54
Subtheme 3.2.4: Human Connections .....	54
Subtheme 3.2.5: Interacting Changes Worldview .....	55
Theme 4: Impact over Time .....	56
Subtheme 4.1: Starting to Forget .....	56
Subtheme 4.2: Return to Normal .....	57
Subtheme 4.3: Friendships and Lasting Bonds .....	57
Summary .....	58
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	59
Discussion .....	59
Theme 1: Impact of In-Country Experiences .....	60
Subtheme 1.1: Impact of the Culture .....	60
Subtheme 1.1.1: Respect for Cultural Differences .....	60
Subtheme 1.1.2: Class Differences .....	61
Subtheme 1.1.3: Two Extremes .....	62
Subtheme 1.1.4: Awareness of Economic Privilege .....	62

Subtheme 1.2: The Impact of the Group .....	63
Subtheme 1.2.1: Team Unity .....	63
Subtheme 1.2.1: Unresolved conflicts .....	64
Subtheme 1.2.3: Self-care .....	64
Theme 2: The Impact of Reentry .....	64
Subtheme 2.1: Lack of Closure .....	65
Subtheme 2.2: Reverse Culture Shock .....	65
Subtheme 2.3: Back to Work .....	66
Subtheme 2.4: Feeling Isolated .....	66
Theme 3: The Impact on Multicultural and Social Justice Competence .....	67
Subtheme 3.1: Impact on Counseling .....	67
Subtheme 3.1.1: Professional Impact .....	67
Subtheme 3.1.2: Increased Self-Confidence .....	68
Subtheme 3.1.3: Increased Advocacy .....	69
Subtheme 3.1.4: Impact of Historical Context .....	69
Subtheme 3.2: Impact on the Individual .....	70
Subtheme 3.2.1: Economic Privilege .....	71
Subtheme 3.2.2: Existential Reevaluation .....	71
Subtheme 3.2.3: Challenging Assumptions .....	72
Subtheme 3.2.4: Human Connections .....	72
Subtheme 3.2.5: Interacting Changes Worldview .....	73
Theme 4: Impact over Time .....	74

Subtheme 4.1: Starting to Forget .....	74
Subtheme 4.2: Return to Normal .....	75
Subtheme 4.3: Friendships and Lasting Bonds .....	75
Implications for Counselor Educators and Recommendations .....	75
Limitations .....	78
Summary .....	79
REFERENCES .....	80

## **CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM**

The need for multiculturally competent counselors is increasing given today's progressively globalized world (Al-Sharif & Garcia, 2019; Berg & Schwander, 2019; Brock et al., 2019; Dickson et al., 2019; Ratts, 2016; Sue & Sue, 2019). It is the responsibility of ethical counselors and counselor educators to have the self-awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to competently treat clients from diverse cultural backgrounds (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Brown, 2004; Collins, 2007; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014). By interacting with different cultures through cultural immersion activities, such as study abroad and service-learning experiences, counselors and counselors in training can become more multiculturally competent (Dorsett et al., 2019; Ellinghaus, 2019; Maultsby & Stutts, 2019; Prosek & Michel, 2016).

### **Multicultural Counseling**

Before the 1950s, little attention was paid to the importance of addressing issues of diversity in counseling (Bauman et al., 2003; Casas et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2019). The counseling process instead incorporated Western values that were not inclusive of ethnic and racial minority perspectives (Singh, 2020). As a result, early views for counseling racial and ethnic minorities emphasized the need for assimilation into the dominant culture to achieve success (Jackson, 1995; McAulffe, 2019; Ratts et al., 2016). However, in the 1950s, the field began to question the validity of minority clients' results on tests constructed and normed for majority clients (Jackson, 1995), which led to examining the role of multicultural issues in counseling.

After the 1964 Civil Rights Act, a shift to cross-cultural and multicultural counseling began, and prejudice and discrimination in the counseling relationship started to be addressed (Sue & Sue, 2019). Cross-cultural counseling was considered any counseling involving two or more individuals from different backgrounds (Sue et al., 1982). During the 1960s and 1970s, literature emerged on cultural responsiveness and bias in the fields of counseling and psychology (Singh et al., 2020).

In the early 1990s, two landmark works promoted multicultural counseling competency as the fourth force in counseling and sparked three decades of scholarship (Arrendondo & Toporek, 2004; Ratts et al., 2016). The *Multicultural Counseling Competencies and Standards: A Call to the Profession* identified 31 specific multicultural counseling competencies (MCCs) that focus on counselor awareness of their assumptions, values, and biases; understanding the worldview of the culturally diverse client; and developing appropriate techniques or interventions (Sue et al., 1992). In 1996, Arredondo expanded the MCCs to include 119 standards and explanatory statements designed to help counselors become more culturally responsive. However, though the MCCs established the standard for defining multicultural competence, the field recognized the need to create a more inclusive and broader understanding of culture and diversity. Therefore, in 2015, the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) established a committee tasked with revising the MCCs.

### **Multicultural Counseling and Social Justice Competencies**

The AMCD sought to conceptualize culture and diversity in terms of the intersection of the multiple client and counselor identities (Ratts et al., 2015). This led to the creation of the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (MSJCCs), which offer a framework for

counselors to implement these competencies into counseling theories, practices, and research. By conceptualizing the intersecting relationships found in the counselor–client interaction in four quadrants (Appendix C), this framework allows counselors to identify the intersection of multiple identities and the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression that could come into play in the counseling relationship. The MSJCCs also include a road map; developmental domains of multicultural and social justice competency; aspirational competencies of attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and action; and ecological layers of counselor advocacy (see Appendix C). All these dynamics are filtered through the lens of counselor self-awareness, attitudes and beliefs, skills, knowledge as they integrate the client’s worldview, counseling relationship, and counseling/advocacy interventions into practice (Ratts et al., 2015). The MSJCCs are now considered the next iteration of the larger human rights movement in counseling (Ratts et al., 2015), with the counselor now able to balance individual counseling with social justice. Due to their influence on the field of counseling, the MSJCCs can stimulate a similar transformation in counseling and counselor education.

### **Social Justice**

Multicultural counseling is seen as the “fourth force” in psychology and counseling theory (Pederson, 1991), and social justice advocacy is the “fifth force” (Lee, 2012). The constructs of social justice have roots in philosophy and religion, which have recently been more explored in education and counseling (Schulze et al., 2017). Social justice is not a passive construct but rather one that requires individuals to engage in advocacy and become part of the change (Shriberg et al., 2008). As the counseling profession begins establishing a more comprehensive identity, the role of social justice and advocacy becomes increasingly important

(Gess, 2016). Though the MCCs addressed the need for cultural sensitivity, there is a need to recognize the impact of societal privilege and oppression intersecting with culture to promote social justice advocacy (Hays, 2005; McClellan et al., 2019).

Most cross-cultural counseling theorists cite the first step toward being able to work effectively with clients from different cultural backgrounds as gaining awareness of personal values and biases (Sue, 2006). By having a clear understanding of their belief system, including stereotypes and prejudices, therapists can monitor how those beliefs may enter into treatment. In doing so, they can actively avoid imposing their beliefs on their clients and negatively impacting the therapeutic alliance (Coseo, 1997), which is an important factor for the effectiveness of the counseling process (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999). If racially and ethnically diverse clients feel as though their counselor does not understand them, they may stop receiving mental health services (Huang et al., 2005), and a lack of cultural competency can result in misdiagnosis (Wahowiak, 2015). Thus, addressing cultural factors in the counseling process can enhance counselor credibility and improve the counseling relationship (Sue & Sue, 2013). For instance, social justice work and service learning can encourage students and educators to become involved in areas they might have previously not been engaged with (Megivern, 2010).

Effective multicultural training needs to impact both the cognitive and affective domains (Sue et al., 1982). For multicultural counseling to be effective, it must also be applicable to the counselor's daily life, connecting classroom work to real-world situations (Collins & Pieterse, 2007). This is part of what makes study abroad trips so impactful; they enable students to move past confusion, frustration, and even resistance to self-reflection (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clark, 2010). By understanding personal feelings, experiences, and biases through studying abroad,

counselors can relate and show empathy to their clients more fully. Study abroad and service-learning courses address the self-awareness of the student by placing them in situations where they are the cultural minority, which can enhance cognitive development, cultural flexibility, and creativity (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Ivers et al., 2013). Though some social justice and service-learning educators are looked down on for being too concerned with political correctness (Freedman, 2007; Megivern, 2010), the goal is to give students the ability and capability to be engaged, thoughtful, and purposeful community members who think critically about community issues.

### **Multicultural Competency in Counselor Education**

Counselor educators are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that their students possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to work with diverse populations (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). There is a large body of research linking multicultural coursework to how counselors work with clients (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017; Redondo et al., 1996; Sue & Sue, 2013; Teehee et al., 2020).

Counselors with more multicultural training have indicated higher abilities of case conceptualization for diverse clients (Constantine, 2002; Dickson & Jepsen, 2007). Additionally, having a more multicultural approach is related to cognitive complexity (Granello, 2010), which can decrease dichotomous decisions when working with clients and enables the counselor to form a better picture of their client (Welfare & Borders, 2010). Multicultural knowledge gained from cultural immersion can give the counselor an increased knowledge of self, increased knowledge of one's own culture, and increased knowledge of personal biases, beliefs, and attitudes (Sue et al., 1992). Counselors' increased knowledge of self and greater access to

emotions enhances their use of self in the therapeutic relationship (Aponte et al., 2009). Thus, culturally immersive experiences are linked with increased self-perceived multicultural competence in counseling students (Choi et al., 2015). Study abroad trips are one way to prepare, teach, and deepen counselors' multicultural competency, which is important for emerging counselors to understand their clients' worldviews. Without study abroad trips, counselors may be unprepared to respond to the needs of minority populations.

### **Service Learning**

Study abroad, cultural immersion, and service learning are the most used terms, used somewhat interchangeably, when discussing time spent away from a home country in conjunction with higher education. Cultural immersion is an experience that enables learners to have direct contact with a culture different than their own (Pope-Davis & Coleman, 1997). Cultural immersion can be described as a form of experiential education in which counselors in training enter an unfamiliar environment. During this time, students are required to function successfully under a unique set of conditions and norms different from their own. This experiential education can expand their cultural awareness and enhance their ability to empathize and work effectively with individuals in other cultures (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005). Cultural immersion plays an essential role in training future counselors and supplementing classroom knowledge through experiential opportunities. The part that the first-hand experience plays in culture learning has consistently been found to be a critical component of intercultural development (Bennett, 1993; Cushner & Brislin, 1997).

Service learning integrates classroom instruction with community service to enhance learning. Service learning works to include experiential learning and meaning-making to support

counselor development (Lloyd-Hazlett, 2018). It has its roots in volunteerism and community services (Kraft, 1996), with emphasis on addressing community-defined needs while integrating course content in fieldwork, deepening learning, and increasing identity development through advocacy engagement (Keller-Dupree et al., 2014). These activities are essential because they promote systemic change, professional development, and multicultural competency (Toporek & Worthington, 2014).

Service learning engages and encourages students to explore social justice in greater depth (Keller-Dupree et al., 2014; Langellier et al., 2020; Midgett & Doumas, 2016). Service learning, particularly in a global context, can enable students to develop an understanding of the complex and interconnected world, reflection and critical thinking skills (Campbell & Oswald, 2018; Capella-Peris et al., 2019; Tyler & Giles, 1999), problem-solving (Folguerias et al., 2020, Giles & Eyler, 1994; Guo et al., 2016), communication (Bliethe, 2016), tolerance for ambiguity (Stanlick & Hammond, 2016), appreciation for diversity (Chan & Chan, 2016; Iyler, 2018), and greater respect for the views of others while also promoting ethical development (Jacoby & Brown, 2009; Megivern, 2010). Further, this learning promotes further education and long-term engagement, builds academic connections across disciplines, and promotes safe space and dialogue (Megivern, 2010), which impacts understanding of social issues, personal insight and development, and cognitive development (Yorio & Ye, 2012). Research has thus shown that there is a strong relationship between service learning and student's dimensions of growth and development (Diambra, 2009; Shin, 2018).

Service learning has also been shown to increase sensitivity to social justice and diverse populations and counselors' commitment to freedom and equality (Chao et al., 2017; Kottler &

Marriner, 2009). Service learning can create more engaged students who are more prone to think about others' needs and interests and can enable them to be more aware of their privilege and the obligations that come from privileges (Hollister et al., 2008). Service learning can help students to overcome cultural barriers and stereotypes (Johnson & Howell, 2017), challenging trainees' perception and awareness of privilege and enhancing MCC (Sue & Sue, 2012). Service learning can allow students to broaden their worldview and overcome cultural boundaries (Anderson, 2002; Myers-Lipton, 1996). It can also allow them to see areas of privilege in their daily lives. This increased awareness can help give the student a deeper understanding of diverse populations and allow them to become more multiculturally competent.

Despite the benefits of service learning, research on the impact of service learning and cultural immersion trips on social awareness, attitudes, and behaviors toward social justice and advocacy is limited. Social issues exist cross-culturally, but awareness of these issues varies. The more socially aware someone is the more likely they are to engage in social action because the first step to engagement is recognition that the problem exists (Darley & Latane, 1968, Noya & Vernon, 2019). Social action and advocacy works to reduce social injustices, and through this process, the individual can gain ethnocultural empathy (Wang, 2003). This social awareness and empathy can be focused both abroad and at home, and on individual, group, institutional, and societal levels (Rothenberg, 2007). Studies have shown that passive methods of learning, such as lectures, are not as effective as more active models such as immersive experiences (Choi & Kirkorian, 2016). But service-learning trips are fully immersive, which suggests that they can produce long-term explicit memory and learning for lasting impact on behaviors and attitudes.

Based on the positive results from research on service learning, studying abroad can improve various aspects of both self-awareness and self-efficacy, which are important parts of personal and professional identity development and necessary for multicultural counseling competence. Studying abroad can challenge cultural stereotypes and increase critical thinking (Dorsett et al., 2019), can increase tolerance of others (Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004), improve intercultural awareness and competence (Bell et al., 2016; Brock et al. 2019; Chieffo & Griffiths 2004; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kitsantas, 2004; Mapp, 2012; Nguyen, 2017; Pedersen, 2010; Rexeisen et al., 2008; Salisbury et al., 2013), and increase cultural sensitivity, self-awareness of cultural values, communication skills, and self-confidence (Smith & Curry, 2011; Pfnister, 1972; Zhai, 2000). Studying abroad has also been shown to increase commonality, flexibility, and achievement (Collins & Arthur, 2010; Stitsworth, 1989). Further research has shown that studying abroad increased cultural intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity (Gmelch, 1997; Inkson & Myers, 2003; Nguyen et al., 2017; Milstein, 2005; Vande Berg et al., 2009).

### **Re-Entry**

One important and sometimes overlooked area of research is re-entry experiences and reverse culture shock. Research on the topic of re-entry dates to 1944 with Schuetz, who investigated reverse cultural adjustment in returning armed forces veterans. The concept of culture shock was formalized in the 1950s and has been a common evolution of timed stages that the traveler goes through. This phenomenon was described by Alfred Adler as a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture (Adler, 1975). Re-entry culture shock can be influenced by social, political, educational, and professional factors. Additionally, individual characteristics such as gender, age, religion, marital status,

socioeconomic status, and prior intercultural experiences can also impact re-entry experiences (Szkudlarek, 2010). Although students are typically prepared for cultural adaptation when they move abroad, they are generally not prepared for the same when they return home (Adler, 1981; Storti, 1997; Sussman, 1986).

Often those who are experiencing reverse culture shock may feel helpless or irritable, but it can also lead to greater understanding of new and diverse experiences. Re-entry stress can make it difficult for the individual to manage personal relationships and emotional well-being due to feelings of disconnection and unable to associate and interact within the environment (Casteen, 2006). However, returning home can trigger self-reflection, which is a large part of becoming an advocate and becoming empowered to work toward social change (Lee & Cunningham, 2019). Though service learning can sometimes cause students feel guilty, uncomfortable, or apprehensive, social justice models of service learning are the closest pedagogy available to help students discover who they are as a basis to understanding what they know about the world (West-Olatunji et al., 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

There has been extensive research on how cultural immersion experiences can facilitate the acquisition of multicultural competence as defined by the prior version of MMC (Barden & Cashwell, 2013), and adding a service-learning component to these experiences has increased the effectiveness of cultural immersion experiences in developing multicultural competence (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). However, in 2016, the field expanded the MCCs to include social justice counseling competence, which now requires counselors to have a self-awareness of privilege and oppression as a key component of providing culturally sensitive counseling (Ratts

et al., 2016), yet little research has been conducted on how these cultural immersion experiences impact the acquisition of the MSJCCs. Therefore, further study is needed to examine the impact that service-learning experiences have on two key components of the social justice competencies: privilege and oppression. This will allow counselor educators to ensure that current methods of helping students meet MCCs are effective in the updated MSJCCs. This study fills this gap by looking at the impact of a service-learning cultural immersion experience on students' understanding of privilege and oppression.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge on the impact of a study abroad service-learning cultural immersion trip on the self-awareness of privilege and oppression for counselors in training. As outlined by the MSJCCs, counselor educators have an obligation to ensure that counselors in training develop the self-awareness of privilege and oppression needed in order to ethically work with their clients. This includes counselors becoming more aware of their biases and assumptions such as how privilege and oppression interact in relational dynamics and the counseling relationship. However, prior research on the role of cultural immersion experiences in facilitating the development of cultural sensitivity has not focused on the updated MSJCCs. Understanding how a study abroad service-learning cultural immersion impacts counseling students' self-awareness of privilege and oppression will provide valuable insight for counselor educators who facilitate these trips.

### **Research Question**

The principal research question for this qualitative study was “How do graduate counseling students describe the impact of their international cultural immersion experience on their perceptions of privilege and oppression?”

### **Significance of the Study**

Cross-cultural experiences play an important role in creating a more globally minded outlook and can help counselors become more culturally sensitive and increase multiculturally and competence (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014). Study abroad programs facilitate this growth by increasing self-awareness (McComb et al., 2019), cultural sensitivity (Prosek & Michel, 2016), and cultural empathy (Barden & Cashwell, 2014). As they learn to value, respect, and appropriately engage with others from a different culture, study abroad programs help students develop a more comprehensive and complex view of the world (Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008; Morgan & Toms-Smedley, 2010). However, with the integration of MSJCCs, there is little research on the effectiveness of these cultural immersion trips on the students’ awareness of privilege and oppression. This study addresses this gap in research, which can advance the field of multicultural and social justice counseling by helping counselor educators understand how to prepare students to work in a more globally minded fashion.

### **Chapter Summary**

The things that lead to increased social justice advocacy (i.e., perspective taking, cognitive flexibility, empathy, social awareness, self-efficacy, and self-awareness) are the constructs that are strengthened by study abroad trips. This chapter presented the history of studying as well as a rationale and basis for MCCs. I also provided a rationale for the study, the statement of the problem, the research question, and significance of the study.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I discuss the history and background of studying abroad as well as the history and impact of multicultural views in counseling by sharing the relevant literature.

### **History of Multicultural Competency**

Multicultural concerns first began to be addressed by counseling and psychology in the 1950s (Bauman et al., 2003). There were three main concerns during this time: concerns over the therapist being perceived as racist, if the majority group counselor could treat the minority client as an individual, and the validity of minority clients' results on tests constructed and normed for majority clients (Jackson, 1995). These concerns would set the stage for future multicultural discussions.

During the 1950s and 60s the United States began embracing desegregation, and counseling services for racial and ethnic minority students emphasized the need for assimilation to achieve success (Jackson, 1995). After the Civil Rights Act, prejudice and discrimination began to be discussed as factors in the counseling relationship more frequently. During this time the term *minority counseling* began to shift toward cross-cultural and multicultural counseling (Copeland, 1983).

As multicultural counseling began to develop, many groups were established to help support it. The Office of Non-White Concerns was established in 1969 by William Banks from the University of California Berkeley and in 1972, became the Association for Non-White Concerns (Sing et al., 2020). Until 1975, this association was focused primarily on African Americans. The American Psychological Association (APA) also addressed cultural diversity, with the Vail Conference in 1973 being one of the first instances. Additionally, the Association of

Black Psychologists was created in 1968, the Association of Psychologists Por La Raza was implemented in 1970, the Asian American Psychological Association was established in 1972, and the Society of Indian Psychologists founded in 1975.

During the 1980s there was a further shift in terminology toward terms such as cross-cultural counseling (Jackson, 1995). In 1991, Pedersen called multicultural counseling the new “fourth force” in psychology and counseling theory adding to the psychodynamic, behavioral, and humanistic movements in the profession. In 1992, Sue et al. developed the multicultural counseling competencies, which related the three categories of awareness, knowledge, and skills, sparking a new era of multicultural competency and training.

By the late 1990s, 89% of counseling and counselor education doctoral programs reported having multicultural course requirements (Abreu et al., 2000). Most programs and syllabi from multicultural classes used Sue et al. ’s (1992) MCC model to frame content in their courses (Pieterse et al., 2009). In 1996, Arredondo expanded the MCC to include 119 standards and explanatory statements designed to help counselors become more culturally responsive.

In 2015 the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) MCC committee began to revise the MCC developed by Sue et al. (1992). They wanted to reflect a more inclusive and broader understanding of culture and diversity that encompasses the intersection of identities, better understand the expanding role of professional counselors to include social justice advocacy, and conceptualize culture and diversity in terms of the intersection of the multiple client and counselor identities grounded in the multicultural and social justice counseling and advocacy (Ratts et al., 2015). This led to the creation of MSJCC, which offers a framework for counselors to implement both multicultural and social justice

competencies into counseling theories, practices, and research (Ratts et al., 2015). The framework uses quadrants to identify the intersection of identities and the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression that could come into play in the counseling relationship. There are also development domains that include counselor self-awareness, client worldview, counseling relationship, and counseling and advocating interventions.

The MSJCC is the next iteration of the human rights movement for equity and justice in counseling (Singh et al., 2020). The MSJCC articulates the roles of privilege and oppression in the counseling relationship between the counselor and the client as well as the larger contexts in which counseling takes place (Singh et al., 2020). Another important aspect of the MSJCCs is the inclusion of global and international advocacy, which encourages counselors to explore how privilege and oppression can be manifested in larger contexts around the globe. The MSJCC and the new additions of social justice are considered by some to be the fifth force of counseling (Ratts et al., 2015). By adding a socioecological perspective both multiculturalism and social justice, the counselor is able to consider the impact of oppression and privilege on mental health, balancing individual counseling with social justice.

The MSJCC urges counselors to learn more about advocacy and how it is taught and to prepare students to look beyond the textbook and bring situations into the classroom that are impacting them. Social justice advocacy can be implemented on many different levels including individual, professional, institutional, societal, and cultural levels. With these emergent standards, it is one of the first times counselors and counselor educators are tasked with roles that go beyond the office (Nassar & Singh, 2019). But there has been limited research on the impact of study abroad and service-learning trips on the impact of social justice advocacy.

## **Multicultural Development in Study Abroad Experiences**

Multicultural counseling competency includes counselor awareness of their values and biases as well as awareness of clients' worldviews and the use of culturally appropriate interventions (Sue & Sue, 2013). Multicultural competence is thus an approach to the counseling process from the context or culture of the client and is part of being an ethical counselor.

Addressing cultural factors in the counseling process can enhance counselor credibility and improve the counseling relationship (Sue & Sue, 2013).

The counselor is one of the most important instruments for change (Platt, 2012), and therapeutic alliance and rapport are important factors surrounding the effectiveness of the counseling process (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999). But if racially and ethnically diverse clients feel as though their counselor does not understand them, they may quickly drop out of mental health services (Huang et al., 2005). Further, a lack of cultural competency and understanding can result in misdiagnosis (Wahowiak, 2015). By understanding personal feelings, experiences, and biases through studying abroad, counselors can relate and show empathy to their clients more fully.

After rapport building, competence is also strongly related to client satisfaction (Constantine, 2002). Multicultural interventions and cultural sensitivity have been positively related with a more favorable perception of the counselor as competent (Wang & Kim, 2010). A counselor's ability to interact with clients from a cultural perspective has an overall positive effect on client alliance and other important therapeutic factors (Tao et al., 2015). Trademarks of effective counselors include their ability to develop a positive working alliance with their clients and make appropriate decisions regarding effective interventions. For instance, communication

styles, nonverbal cues, and theoretical orientation considered to be effective for Eurocentric clients may not be effective for other cultures (Sue, 1990).

Counselors are required to work with clients from a variety of different backgrounds, creating a need to focus on effective training methods so they can better understand and communicate with clients. Effective multicultural training needs to impact both the cognitive and affective domains (Sue et al., 1982). For multicultural counseling to be effective, it must also be directly applicable to the counselor's daily life with a bridge between knowledge obtained in the classroom and real-world situations (Collins & Pieterse, 2007). This is part of what makes study abroad trips so impactful. Students studying abroad can sometimes experience confusion, frustration, and resistance to issues surrounding multicultural competence, which in a classroom setting can impede student development but during study abroad experiences can enable students to move past resistance to reflection (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clark, 2010). A culture-centered approach to counseling places emphasis and recognition on the fact that the client's culture is a foundational and integral part of the counseling process. Counselors must become knowledgeable of the changing racial and ethnic compositions and the issues and challenges that people face (Sheely-Moore & Kooyman, 2011). Service-learning trips can meet all of these needs and are an important area for future counselors to become involved.

### **Attitudes and Beliefs**

Self-awareness is an important component of personal and professional identity development and is considered a fundamental quality of well-functioning counselors, an important therapeutic aid, and a primary principle in the ethical practice of counseling (Jennings & Skovhold, 1999). Cultural awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, and skills are also necessary for

multicultural counseling competence. Though there are many benefits of studying abroad, some of the most reported include increased cultural sensitivity, increased self-awareness of personal cultural values, increased communication skills, and increased self-confidence and self-efficacy (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Cross, 1998; Gmelch, 1997; Inkson & Myers, 2003; Milstein, 2015; Pfnister, 1972; Prosek & Michel, 2016; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014; Smith & Curry, 2011; Zhai, 2000).

During time studying abroad, students have their own point of view challenged through critical reflection and reframing their perceptions, which gives them a greater ability to develop cultural views that are more inclusive and less ethnocentric (Janes, 2008; McComb et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2014). Studying abroad and cultural immersion can heighten cultural awareness through encouraging an examination of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that could have been previously ignored (Bell et al., 2016; Brock et al., 2019; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kitsantas, 2004; Mapp, 2012; Nguyen, 2017; Pedersen, 2010; Rexeisen et al., 2008; Salisbury et al., 2013; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clark, 2010). Cultural immersion experiences can challenge superficial cultural stereotypes and biases, increasing students' capacity for self-reflection, cultural awareness, and sensitivity as well as cognitive flexibility (Crip & Turner, 2012; Dorsett et al., 2019; Gino & Ariely, 2012; Ritter et al., 2012). By placing students in situations where they are the cultural minority, these experiences can enhance cognitive development, cultural flexibility, creativity (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Ivers et al., 2013). Exposure to different cultures also empowers people to gain new insight and enhance creative and critical thinking (Al-Sharif, 2019; Hong et al., 2000; Godart et al., 2015; Hadis, 2005 ; Lee et al., 2012 ; Leung et al., 2008; Lu et al., 2019; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015 ; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009; Saad et al., 2013; Tadmor

et al., 2012). Engaging with other culture groups can also heighten an individual's generalized trust or the belief that human nature is benevolent (Cao et al., 2014) and promote career success (Maddux et al., 2014; Tadmor et al., 2012).

Studying abroad can also build self-efficacy and contribute to students being more aware of personal strengths and limitations (Collins & Arthur, 2010; Milstein, 2005; Nguyen et al., 2017). Study abroad and cultural immersion trips have been shown to decrease anxiety in the counseling session through their impact on self-efficacy (Arnold & McMurtery, 2011; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009). Additionally, teachers with high self-efficacy motivate and praise students more and are better able to guide students in their learning by prompting or offering probing questions. (Gibson & Dembo, 1984).

Further, studying abroad and service learning can help students gain a better understanding of aspects of their and others' cultural backgrounds and improve their ability to establish therapeutic relationships with clients (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005). Students who studied abroad are able to increase their knowledge of the host country and increase their tolerance of others through experiential learning and interactions (Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004), increasing empathy and growth in attitude, emotion, feelings, cultural knowledge, and cultural dissonance (Barden & Cashwell, 2014; Burnett et al., 2004; Canfield et al., 2009; Ishii et al., 2009). Students have also shown increases in global-mindedness, open-mindedness, independence, and international mobility (Berg & Schwander, 2019; Hadis, 2005) as well as increased tolerance of ambiguity (Milstein, 2005; Vande Berg et al., 2009). Studying abroad can also lead to intellectual and emotional growth and promote self-discerning reflections and changes in views of self (Adam et al., 2018; Cushner & Karim, 2004; Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004).

Research has documented the many benefits students have experienced after their study abroad experiences. After returning from a study abroad trip, students have scored higher on commonality, flexibility, and achievement (Stitsworth, 1989). Furthermore, returnees show significant increases in emotional resilience, flexibility, openness, perceptual acuity, and personal autonomy (Mapp, 2012) as well as significant changes in openness, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). Students also show growth in independence, autonomy, and self-reliance (Billingmeier & Forman, 1975; Nash, 1976; Inkson & Myers, 2003; Ryan & Twibel, 2000). Additionally, studying abroad can increase critical consciousness and cultural competence (Boyle et al., 1999; Fawcett et al., 2010; Laubscher, 1994; West-Olatunji et al., 2011), and students have improved their self-awareness, cross-cultural knowledge, and commitment to social justice (Cordero & Rodriguez 2009; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2012). Studying abroad can also lead to sociopolitical and cultural awareness, appreciation for life, and a commitment toward change (Choi et al., 2015).

Studying abroad has also shown beneficial changes in students personal and career growth. Students have scored higher in academic, social, and personal development after studying abroad (Carlson et al., 1990; Hadis, 2005; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015). The experiences can increase problem solving and critical thinking skills, interpersonal and social skills, and adaptability (Pearce & Foster, 2007a). Studying abroad also impacts career choice and graduate study (McGarrity, 2014) as well as civic engagement and social entrepreneurship (Paige et al., 2009). Even brief foreign experiences can have a significant effect on career advancements after graduation (Franklin, 2010; Herrmann & Datta, 2005; Maiworm & Teichler 1996; Stroud, 2010; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007).

## **Re-Entry**

Upon re-entry, many find that they have changed as a result of their international experiences, and many may struggle with readjusting. Returnees have to decide to keep or trim the aspects of their personalities and selves that may have changed while abroad (Kidder, 1992), as they come home with a new self-identity and worldviews (Le & LaCost, 2017; Mooradian, 2004). This struggle was first studied as early as 1944 when researchers were examining the difficulties of returning veterans. Re-entry is often called the most difficult phase of international travel (Bosustow, 2006) and has been defined as a type of reverse cultural shock (Gaw, 2000). The challenges associated with reverse cultural shock can be related to the amount of time spent abroad and the degree of cultural differences between the student's home country and the foreign destinations (Berry, 1997; Casteen, 2006; Geary, 2014; Wu et al., 2015). Also known as "acculturative stress," re-entry often causes stress because the transition has not been anticipated (Martin & Harrell, 2004). Regardless of duration or location, it is possible for travelers to experience substantial re-entry distress (Uehara, 1986). Multiple studies have indicated that travelers report higher levels of distress during re-entry than during the initial cultural adaptation to another country (Adler, 1981; Moore et al., 1988; Sussman, 2000).

As part of re-entry, re-entry adjustment is the re-acculturation to home culture after spending time abroad (Adler, 1981). Acculturation is the process of encountering and adjusting to a new cultural environment that involves changes to an individual's attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions (Tsai et al., 2002). Upon returning home, some students may have to relearn social skills appropriate to the socio-cultural environment (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). There are four dimensions of change that become apparent during the re-entry experience: physical,

interpersonal, cultural, and personal (Citron, 19996). The physical dimension includes changes in diet, climate, time zones, and physical changes. The interpersonal dimension involves changes in relationships with friends, family, and coworkers. The cultural dimension describes the initial confusion about appropriate cultural norms, customs, and values from home and those adopted from the host culture. Finally, the personal dimension refers to the personal growth and maturity gained from the experience.

There are several popular theories of adjustment and readjustment. Martin and Harrell (2004) conceptualized a three-pronged categorization of re-entry adjustment: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. Affective readjustment, sometimes referred to as the U-, W-, or J-curve, is the idea that looks at areas of stress and coping. With a U-curve theory, there are generally four stages: a honeymoon phase of fascination with the new culture, a culture shock phase characterized by disillusionment and frustration, an adjustment stage, and a mastery stage (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Further, there are four types of cultural identity adjustments during study abroad that can impact the re-entry process: subtractive, additive, affirmative, and intercultural (Sussman, 2000). Research has also suggested that intercultural identity formation during study abroad can be home-favored, host-favored, integrated, and disintegrated, with re-entry being easier for those in home-favored and integrated categories (Cox, 2004).

Studying abroad is a long-term asset for future decisions on education and future career (Allison et al., 2012) but can lead to many effects on students' emotions. For instance, they may experience annoyance and frustration in the home country (Christofi & Thompson, 2007).

Students also often report feelings of loss and phases of bereavement; they may also be grieving

the loss of friends, adventure, a different way of life, an emerging identity, or newfound independence. This loss has been described as disenfranchised grief that centers on a longing for belonging that cannot be openly expressed (Butcher, 2002). Frequently, returnees mention missing program peers and faculty leaders as well as the stabilizing force of the group that becomes a type of temporary home while abroad (Allison et al., 2011). They also experience distance between friends and family who cannot relate to their experiences abroad or how they feel about re-entry, making school and family key influencers of the re-entry process (Lin & Peng, 2019; Martin, 1983; Talawanich et al., 2019; Uehara, 1983; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Additionally, younger returnees tend to have more challenges than older ones (Cox, 2004), and faculty may experience less struggles with re-entry than students (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963).

Regardless of the impact of re-entry, research on students' readjustment patterns is inconsistent and often has conflicting results. It often varies due to differing definitions of similar variables, which makes drawing research-based conclusions difficult (Szkudlarek, 2010). Much of the research is also based on assumptions from several decades ago despite changes in communication and global experiences. Additionally, much of the literature has focused on the challenges of re-entry experience as a problem rather than as a potential resource (Kartoshinka, 2015). However, research has indicated that counseling programs need to discuss re-entry concerns with students before they return home (Lau & Ng, 2012). Upon returning, students need time for reflection and processing as well as for a debriefing with the immersion group (Mehta, 2011). Support systems may not understand the changes of the returnee, or they may minimize the experience as a vacation (Arthur, 2003).

## **Counselor Educators**

Multicultural competence is just as important for counselor educators as it is for the counselors they teach. Though students' study abroad trips have been studied, faculty have not been despite their central position in an institution's internationalization process (Kim & Locke, 2010). Faculty should be comfortable taking a multifunctional role and prepare to be active in flexible problem-solving while modeling for students how to handle unanticipated challenges that may occur during immersion experiences (Allen & Young, 1997).

Additionally, faculty often need international exposure to other cultures as much as their students (Pullman, 2004). Faculty report that international courses were personally and professionally transformative and that travel allows them to learn from cultural differences by increasing social and global awareness (McDowell et al., 2012). By gaining better knowledge of culture, being aware of the role of culture in teaching and educational systems, developing cultural and societal self-awareness, becoming more socio-politically aware, and acquiring skills and attitudes that support cross-cultural interactions, faculty can become more thorough counselor educators (Hauerwas et al., 2017). Teachers who study abroad often return with a deeper sense of authority and a stronger desire to share their knowledge and experiences with others (Hamza, 2010; Martens, 1991; Sandgren et al., 1999). Often after time spent abroad, faculty will also re-examine the assumptions underlying their research and training activities (Kim, 2009) as well as perceptions of their students, institutions, and society, which may help them get to know students on a deeper, more meaningful level (Ellinghaus et al., 2019; Madden et al., 2019).

## **Religion and Spirituality**

To have a full and meaningful understanding, religion and spirituality are central to global education and need to be addressed. If students participate in study abroad programs where religion and spirituality are not addressed, it can be disorienting for students (Willis, 2012). Further, the complexities of foreign cultures may not be fully understood without delving into religious topics. When religion and spirituality are bypassed, students may miss crucial development in intercultural skills and interfaith dialogue (Unkule, 2018).

Transitions, changes, and development in students' faith while abroad are common (Dinani, 2018). Religion may function as a filter through which experience abroad is perceived. When confronted with varying values during their time studying abroad, students and faculty are challenged to self-examine their own behaviors and values. These challenges allow students the opportunity to recognize and reflect on how their behaviors affect others, acquiring a degree of multicultural training (Jenkins, 2011). For instance, after their time abroad students become more favorable toward religious diversity and more favorable toward religious out-groups but less favorable toward atheists and agnostics and those seen as irreligious or hostile toward religion (Anderson et al., 2020; Wright & Nichols, 2014).

### ***Recommendations for Counselor Educator Study Abroad Trips***

Study abroad programs with an intentional focus on social conflict, resolution, and time for reflection can strengthen professional counselor identity (Smith et al., 2014). Counselor educators should coordinate activities that can create emotional reactions and sustained contact with members of the host community. Further, multicultural growth is fostered when there are opportunities for students to critically reflect on their immersion experiences (Shannonhouse et al., 2015). Counselor educators should facilitate large and small group activities that engage

students in deepening self-knowledge about culture, privilege, power, oppression, social justice, and advocacy.

The development of meaningful relationships is also a critical component of study abroad trips (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2005). The duration of the trip should be long enough to allow adjustment for culture shock, the participants and facilitators should be racial-ethnically diverse, pre-departure multicultural training workshops and seminars should be implemented to encourage active learning and reflective journaling, and debriefing of the experience is vital (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2005). Further, counselor educators should consider activities that allow students the feeling of being an outsider and being immersed in a culture where norms are different from their own (Barden & Cashwell, 2014). The role that the first-hand experience plays in culture learning is a component of intercultural development (Bennett, 1993; Cushner & Brislin, 1997).

Program leaders should also encourage and validate students' reflections of their experiences to help students reduce biases and prejudice (Brown, 2004). Encouraging creative interventions to process their experience can also be an important outlet (Smith, 2001). Students who engage in subsequent learning opportunities continue to find meaning in their study abroad experience, but those who do not integrate the experience have a less impactful trip (Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011). Thus, encouraging frequent discussion and reflection is important during cultural immersion trips because of the relationship between processing and fostering critical thinking and creating new knowledge (Dewey, 1933; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clare, 2010). Post immersion reflections that give the participants time to process and unpack their experiences are also vital (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). However, group processing is less

effective than in groups larger than 10, and intergroup safety needs to be considered to avoid negative experiences due to group dynamics (Barden & Cashwell, 2013).

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented a review of the history of multicultural counseling competencies and the way that cultural immersion study abroad trips can help to build and support these competencies in counseling students. In this chapter, evidence was presented to show that study abroad and service-learning trips can impact multicultural competency through knowledge, beliefs, and skills. However, little was found examining the impact of these trips on counseling student's social justice advocacy and awareness of privilege and oppression. In the next chapter, I will present the methodology for the study.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

In this chapter, I present the qualitative methodology and foundation used to examine the lived experiences of master's level students during an international counseling cultural immersion trip. This chapter includes the research questions, the research design, the participants, the procedures, and the data analyses. Finally, I provide verification procedures and ethical considerations

### **Research Purpose**

The primary purpose of this research was to identify the central themes that emerged from master's level counseling students' narratives about their personal experiences during an international service-learning trip and how this impacted their awareness of privilege and oppression after their return home.

### **Research Question**

The principal research question for this qualitative study is "How do graduate students describe the impact of their international cultural immersion experience on their perceptions of privilege and oppression?"

### **Research Design**

The research design used for this study was a phenomenological thematic analysis. I chose this design as my approach due to its ability to find the common meaning found in the shared experiences of various individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Using this method allowed me to answer the research question by examining the emergent themes from the experienced phenomenon described by students who participated in a counseling practicum or internship in a foreign country.

When examining the choice of qualitative design, it is important to discuss why a phenomenological thematic analysis was the best approach for this study rather than other qualitative methods (McLeod, 2011). Since this study sought to examine multiple participants' views on the impact of service-learning, I ruled out case studies because they would have limited me to a single participant's experience. Since I was examining the cultural characteristics of the participants and not the culture of the locations visited, I also eliminated an ethnographic approach. Finally, I eliminated grounded theory because I did not intend to develop a new theory (Holloway & Tordes, 2003).

Current research suggests that cultural immersion trips can be impactful on multicultural awareness, but currently there is little research detailing the impact cultural immersion trips could have on social justice and advocacy. As such, my main criterion for selecting an approach was its ability to find the common meaning among individuals who had a shared experience or phenomenon, which would help fill a gap that has not been adequately explored. Therefore, I used the phenomenological research method to look deeper at the lived experiences of master's level counseling students during a service-learning trip and the impact this had on their perceptions of privilege and oppression.

Additionally, thematic analysis provided flexibility in methodology while allowing for rich detail and description (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In thematic analysis, I as the researcher played an active role in identifying and reporting the themes of interest. Though this methodology allows for themes emerge organically from the data, I provided the narrative descriptions about these emergent themes (Braun et al., 2019). Furthermore, thematic analysis allows the researcher to take either an inductive or a deductive approach to identify codes and

emergent themes; however, these studies are not strictly one approach or the other (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Because of the purpose of this study, I felt that the deductive method was not appropriate as it uses existing concepts or ideas as a framework to interpret the data. Instead I chose the inductive approach, which derives the themes and codes from the content of the data. This approach seeks to find the voice and meaning that arises naturally from the data (Braun et al., 2019; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). As a result, the inductive approach allowed me to discover the themes that emerged from the questions asked during the interviews (Braun et al., 2019).

### **Selection of Participants**

The target population for this study consisted of 10 master's level clinical mental health counseling students from a CACREP-accredited institution. This number was within the range and guidelines set forth for qualitative phenomenological research designs (Creswell, 2007). The students were enrolled in a practicum or internship that took place during a 24-day international service-learning trip. All the students were enrolled in a faculty supervision course taught by one professor. IRB approval was obtained on October 6, 2020 along with permission to record and publish the findings prior to contacting any participant.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In this qualitative research, I was the human instrument through which all data were collected and analyzed (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As the researcher, I was a facilitator of the students' stories and recounting of their reentry experiences. As the human instrument, it is important to identify my role in the research and any potential bias that could have manifested in data collection and analysis (Corbin et al., 2015). I was also a participant during the study abroad

trip being studied. However, even though these interviews were conducted 16 months after the trip, I used bracketing in the process of analyzing the findings and writing the results according to the notes and mapping I made while collecting data. Therefore, I followed Moustakas' (1994) epoche process, bracketing off my assumptions and expectations during the interviews as well to make room for the participant to fully engage in their experience. I also maintained close contact with my committee to help be self-aware, unbiased, and accountable.

### **Research Procedure**

Semi-structured interviews took place through video conference with the audio recorded. To ensure that there was ample time, I scheduled each interview for approximately an hour and a half, which is consistent with previous research recommendations (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). The interview questions are available in Appendix E. The questions were open-ended and allowed the participants to reflect fully on the experiences explored. Once the interviews were complete, I carefully transcribed each interview separately. To verify the accuracy, I read the transcripts while listening to the recorded interviews.

### **Preparing to Collect Data**

I initially brainstormed a list of potential interview questions that would help to draw out the experience of the participants, which I gave to my committee to review. After considering committee suggestions, I was able to narrow the focus and direction of the questions. After committee review, four questions were determined (Appendix E).

After receiving IRB approval, I contacted the participants via email. The email invited them to participate in the study and gave information about the research purpose. If they chose to participate, they responded with a signed consent form. The next step was to arrange an

interview either in person or by video conference. I recorded the interviews with two audio recording devices in case one malfunctioned. These recordings were kept in a secure place. Further, a password-protected online storage provider was set up for each participant so that they had the opportunity to go back and listen to their recordings as well as add any additional information that may have been left out of the original interview. The purpose of these different approaches was to keep confidentiality and anonymity among participants. All other information such as transcriptions, researcher notes, and digital recordings were placed on a secure server. I then transcribed the interviews verbatim.

### **Process of Thematic Analysis**

After transcribing the interviews and verifying their accuracy, to become familiar with the data, I read through the material several times. No comments were made during the first read-through. The next reading involved creating guiding notes and comments on the side of the transcript and highlighting initial statements that represented emerging themes. The following sections detail each step followed for thematic analysis.

#### **Step 1: Become Familiar with the Data**

To become familiar with the data, I read each interview numerous times. After creating the verbatim transcripts, I then listened to the interviews while reading the transcriptions to verify accuracy. No marks or comments were written, created, or noted during these initial readings (Braun & Clark, 2006). Subsequent readings involved creating comments on the transcript. After initial comments were created, I then went back through each transcript and began to create the initial codes. These initial codes and comments were reviewed by my dissertation chair.

## **Step 2: Generate Initial Codes**

After reviewing my initial comments, I created a document with initial coding and assigned a number to the corresponding quote. These initial codes were reviewed by my dissertation chair. I later created a separate coding worksheet to keep track of potential emerging themes. Irrelevant material was then removed (Braun & Clark, 2006).

## **Step 3: Search for Themes**

To further define and refine the themes from the previous step, I reviewed the remaining data line by line and coded the information by theme and subthemes, which were then discussed and negotiated with my dissertation chair (Braun & Clark, 2006). I used an open-coding method, meaning there were not pre-set codes. Through the analysis and successive re-readings, some codes changed, and modifications were made as needed to verify.

## **Step 4: Reviewing Themes**

In this step, I began to extract the remaining information and arrange it by code. I also created a map on a separate document to denote the relationship between each theme and subtheme (Braun & Clark, 2006). Codes were revised and reviewed by myself and my dissertation chair as needed to make sure they fit in the denoted category.

## **Step 5: Define and Name the Themes**

In this final stage, I reviewed and verified that each theme and subtheme accurately represented the essence of the participants' experiences. Together with my dissertation chair, we worked on clarifying the names of each theme and subtheme.

## **Step 6: Write up Findings**

During this step, I reviewed Braun and Clark's 15-point checklist (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Additionally, all participants were assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms, and identifiable locations and events were redacted to maintain confidentiality. The themes are discussed in the next chapter.

### **Verification Procedures**

In qualitative research, there are four areas of trustworthiness (McLeod, 2011). Credibility was addressed by using critical self-reflection and bracketing. This was further addressed through using verbatim transcripts to create an accurate portrayal of participants' meaning and to help avoid inference. Transferability was addressed through a comprehensive and detailed explanation of the context of the study and the phenomena being investigated. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through member checking, which let the participants verify the transcriptions (Bowen, 2005).

### **Ethical Considerations**

I obtained consent from the participants (Appendix F) prior to commencing with the interviews. The consent form included a detailed description of what the study would entail with instructions on how to respond if they chose to participate. The form also notified participants that their identities would be anonymous. I repeated this during the interview. With the intent to eliminate and reduce all possible risk to the participants, I adhered to all the guidelines set by the IRB. The data collected were used only for the purposes of this study. All data are password protected and accessible only by me. However, for data verification each participant was also given access to their recording via different accounts through password-protected file sharing, which was set up to keep confidentiality and anonymity with the participants.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed the phenomenological methodology used to answer the research question. This included participant selection, the six-phase process of thematic analysis, the role of the researcher, and the process of establishing trustworthiness. In the next chapter, I will provide a detailed description of the analysis and themes that emerged.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

Chapter 4 provides a detailed exploration of the thematic analysis that was used to arrive at the themes and subthemes for the data. This chapter describes the focus of the research, the researcher's role, type of study, and the sample and provides an overview of the procedure and data analysis. Additionally, the five themes, associated subthemes, and other items of interest will be provided with supporting verbatim extracts from the data.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research study was to understand the impact of a service-learning study abroad trip on multicultural and social justice competency. The primary goal was to identify themes and subthemes that emerged from the time in-country, the reentry experience, and the persistence of social justice and cultural awareness a year after the trip. Analyzing these themes may help increase counselor educators' understanding of the factors that impact the development of multicultural and social justice competence during a service-learning cultural immersion experience.

### **Sample**

As discussed in Chapter 3, the population for the research consisted of students who completed their practicum or internship on a service-learning study abroad trip while they were master's level counseling students in a CACREP program. This was a purposefully selected sample. At the time of the research, all participants had graduated from the program. The IRB at Liberty University approved the study (IRB FY20-21-201) before recruitment emails were sent to all 10 students who met the selection criteria. Out of the 10, six students responded and were

subsequently interviewed. All of these students were Caucasian, with five female students and one male student.

### **Research Methodology Applied to Data Analysis**

The thematic analysis of this data was guided by the procedure developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data were gathered through interviews, then each individual data set was reviewed, verbatim transcripts were created, and initial codes were identified, refined, and paired. The codes and data extracts were analyzed to generate multiple thematic maps that were reviewed and revised several times. After the development of each theme and subtheme, a thorough review to establish accuracy was conducted, leading to a complete thematic analysis of the data.

Participants for this study were master's level counseling students who fulfilled part of their practicum or internship experience through a 4-week study abroad trip. All the participants were on the same trip from the same CACREP university. I contacted the 10 counseling students from the trip, emailing them the recruitment email along with the informed consent document. Students indicated their interest in participating by returning the informed consent document. I then contacted the participants to set up times for the video interview.

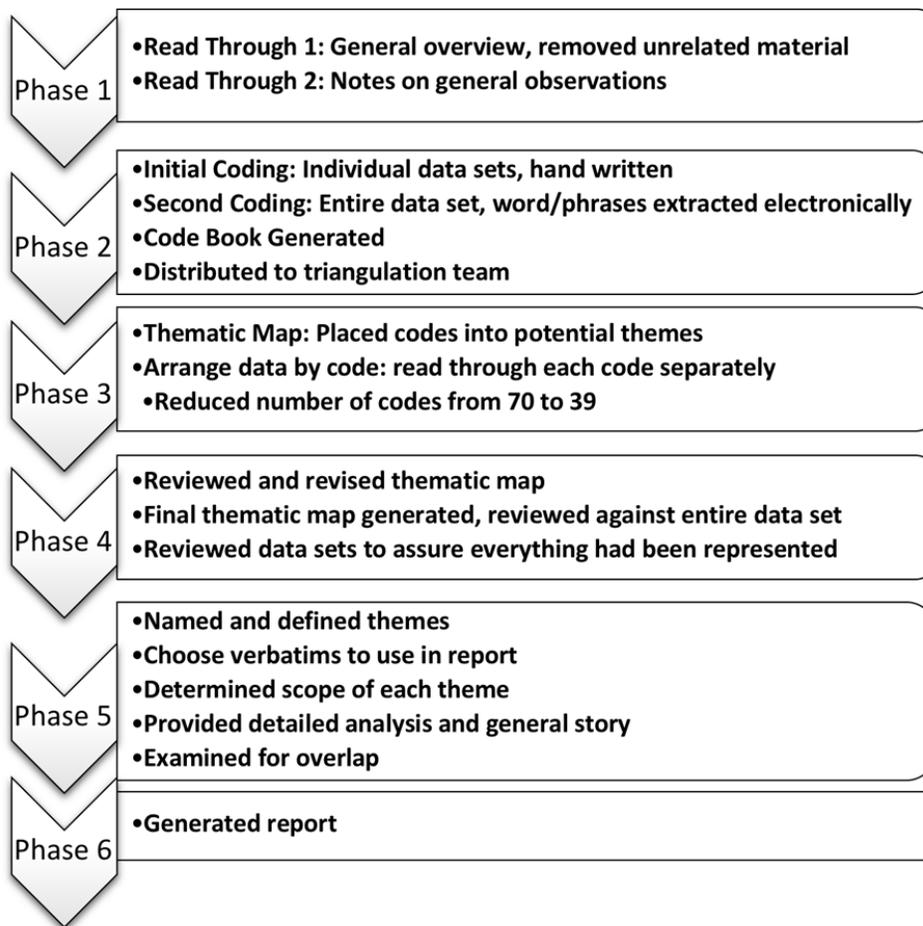
Interviews were completed by video conference during October and November 2020. These video conferences were audio recorded by two different devices. The recordings were then transcribed into verbatim transcripts. After this transcription, I worked on developing themes and subthemes. The procedures for this thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clark (2006) are described in the following section, with suggestions for trustworthiness by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

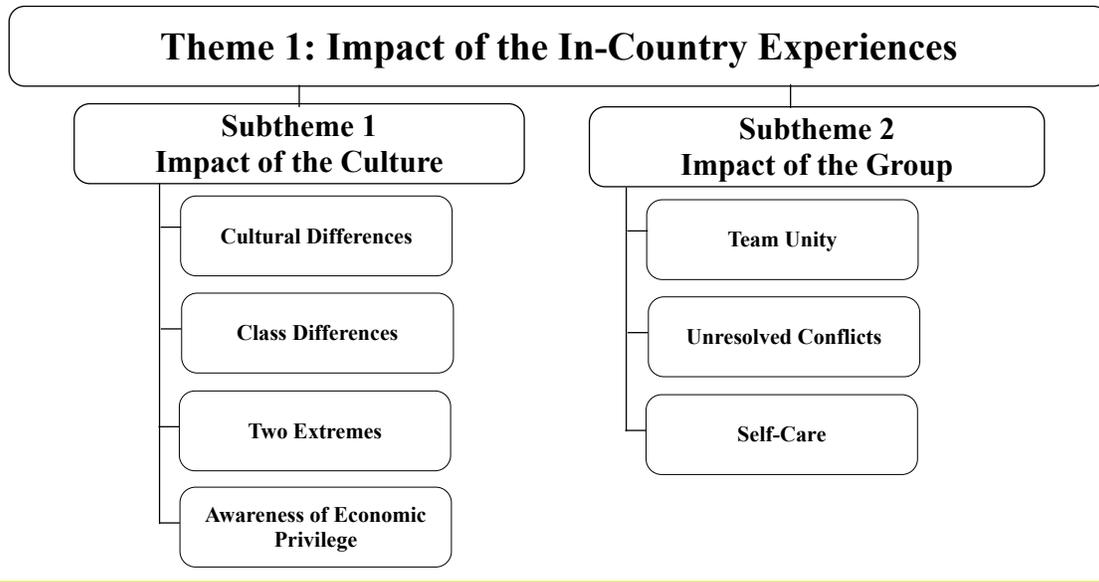
## Data Analysis

For data analysis, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. First, I immersed myself in the data. Next, I coded the individual data. Following this I coded the potential themes and formulated an initial thematic map. After creating the map, I along with my dissertation chair worked together to refining and reviewing the themes as well as further defining and naming of the themes. Finally, I worked together with my dissertation chair to generate a report.

**Figure 1**

*Six Phases of Thematic Data Analysis*





*Note.* From “Using thematic analysis in psychology,” by V. Braun and V. Clark, 2006, *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), p. 87 (DOI:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa).

### Emergent Themes

Upon analysis, I found four themes, which were further broken down into 25 subthemes. The four major themes were the impact of in-country experiences, the impact of reentry, the impact on multicultural and social justice competence, and impact over time. These themes and subthemes will be further discussed in the following sections. For this data set there were no disconfirming data sets shown.

Theme 1: Impact of In Country Experiences	Theme 2: Impact of Reentry	Theme 3: Impact on Multicultural and Social Justice Competence	Theme 4: Impact Over Time
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*Figure 4.2* Final Thematic Map

### Theme 1: Impact of In-Country Experiences

Participants noted that being immersed in the culture influenced their views, values, and emotions. While learning to interact with different cultures, the participants were able to make observations that challenged their personal values as well as the way they view the world around them. Perception of the level of development of the country affected the level and amount of oppression that they were confronted with and observed. Participants also noticed that it was easy to delineate between affluent areas and disadvantaged areas with these worlds being just a block away from each other in most cases.

*Figure 4.3 Theme 1 Map of Sub-Themes*

### ***Subtheme 1.1: Impact of the Culture***

Throughout the interviews the participants discussed that seeing the way that others lived and what they directly experienced had a profound impact on their trip. Participants observed stark differences in living standards as well as different values sets and ways of living. For some participants this brought up feelings of discomfort, while for others it led to a desire to live more like the experienced culture.

**Subtheme 1.1.1: Respect for Cultural Differences.** Participants compared the countries visited to their home country as well as cultural expectations placed on them both at home and abroad. While making comparisons to both expectations and lived experiences, participants were able to begin to take a deeper look at what different cultures view as valuable and begin to discover what their own values were as well. Hayden asserted that, “Culturally in America, especially as women and as younger people, just kind of the freedom that we have to literally travel the world.” Additionally, Hayden remarked that, “Women were a lot quieter in their culture, you had to specifically ask them in the group settings, ‘hey like what do you think

specifically', so I noticed that as being different." Hayden also reflected that "Their culture specifically is very respectful of older people, anyone that's older than you just had a lot of respect there ... there's just a respect difference there." Arden also reflected,

But as far as oppression, I never really felt oppressed. I did sometimes feel a little ... I don't know. So many of them could speak English. And I couldn't communicate with them on their terms, you know, that made me ... not really feel shame, but more like, why does all the world have to learn our language, why aren't we making an effort to communicate in their on their terms? If I'm gonna go visit their country, I wish that I would have prepared a little bit more ... We got [hello in language of country], we got some of the little things down, but I think I could have done a little better.

**Subtheme 1.1.2: Class Differences.** Similarly, while on the service-learning trip, because of the extended time that the participants were able to spend directly interacting with the locals, all the participants noted a stark difference between classes. This awareness, like the awareness of lack of a middle ground, had participants thinking about their own place in the world, how they impacted it, and why they were ended up with the lifestyles they had instead of the ones of the people in the culture. Sterling stated, "I feel like that was the main thing I noticed, you're either rich, or you're oppressed. I didn't really see the middle ground ... I guess I really only noticed privilege with the super-rich areas."

**Subtheme 1.1.1: Lack of a Middle Ground.** Because of the location of the service-learning trip, participants constantly saw a dichotomy in standards of living. Oppression and privilege were often viewed in Westerner terms, rooted in how developed the areas were. These observations had participants aware of their privilege because they were in one world but were

also viewing another world that is completely different. Rory noted that, “We were in this very nice place, but then we walk less than a block away and you just see little ruins of buildings.” Pat also noticed “just the differences in the standard of living, in the cities where we were, it was very similar to home. But once you got out in the outlying area, you had huts and just trash everywhere.” Sterling echoed that thought: “It was drastic to go from the city where we were staying, and just a one-minute drive, you’re like, in the slums.”

**Subtheme 1.1.4: Awareness of Economic Privilege.** Participants discussed signs of economic privilege, and many participants noticed that they were the recipients of special attention or benefits. For many, these advantages made participants uncomfortable, and often during the interviews when recalling these benefits participants mentioned the cognitive dissonance that these situations created. Rory stated,

We have signs of privilege pretty much because we were able to go to these countries, we had means, travel, money, support, security, [it’s] fairly simple to get into the country and out of the country. But I’m assuming that’s just because of being Americans, especially like a White American in the country. Personally, I felt like I was treated almost like royalty, which was kind of weird, even to the point where going to dinner with a teammate, the owners of the restaurant changing the music to English, as opposed to the native tongue. So that was pretty bizarre.

Sterling reflected,

It was weird that, not weird, it was fantastic, that everything was so cheap. Paying for a massage, felt wrong. I was getting massages from 16 year olds in [Country 2] at the night market for practically free like \$4. I feel like I’m lying to you, because this is not what I

should be paying you right now. So I felt like in some sort of way, I was privileged to be experiencing that. So it's not like, I'm getting some sort of special privilege. Everybody gets those prices. But it just felt like robbery. And it's like I should give you \$5 extra because this is robbery.

***Subtheme 1.2: The Impact of the Group.***

Participants noted that group dynamics played a large part in their experiences in county as well as their self-care, satisfaction, and sensations and emotions. During this trip, participants noticed differences in belief systems and values within the team and struggles within the team that led to conflict.

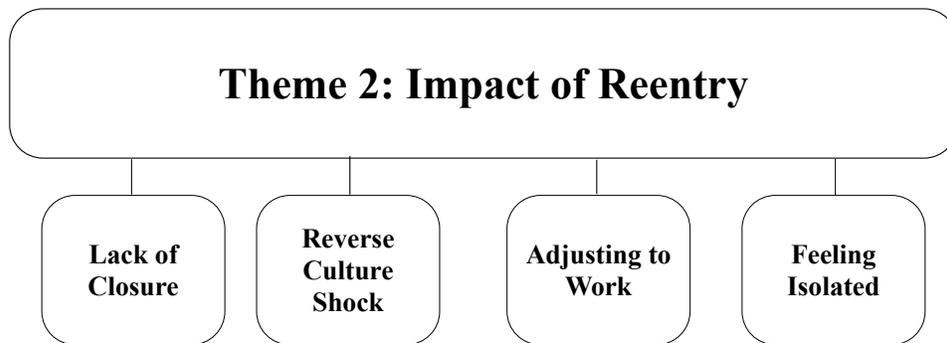
**Subtheme 1.2.1: Team Unity.** Several of the participants mentioned intergroup struggles and the added tensions this created and the need for team unity. Hayden noticed that, "There's just so much tension between certain people in the group that I wasn't even necessarily involved in but it just made it uncomfortable to be around and you feel the weight of feeling like you have to pick a side." When speaking about the need for team unity, Rory remarked that "I might have spoke up sooner with specific differences that I thought could be damaging to the team" Rory also later remarked that negative team interactions, "created I think, a lot of desire for me to kind of split off from the group instead of, you know, addressing it, when it was happening."

**Subtheme 1.2.1: Unresolved conflicts.** Many of the participants noted feeling the need to tamp down their emotions to get along with other members on the trip and just to get along and get through with the trip, with Rory mentioning "But at that point, it was so close to the end of the trip, it was just kind of like bear and grin it, and then just get home." Similarly, many of the participants mentioned not feeling heard or needing to be heard. Whitney stated,

I think people were made to feel like, they had to do or be a certain way, or do a certain thing, or act a certain way, for the good of the team ... but you know, when you're asking people to do that, within like a 24- to 48-hour time span after some, like, significant hurt has happened, that's not realistic.

**Subtheme 1.2.3: Self-care.** Participants discussed the need for self-care, noting that it was often difficult to find the time and space needed for self-care. Rory stated, "With these trips, when you are investing so much into a population, you do become emotionally raw. And there's not a lot of chance for self-care."

## **Theme 2: The Impact of Reentry**



*Figure 4.4 Theme 2 Map of Sub-Themes*

Reentry, the return to the participant's home country, represented a struggle and time of difficulty for almost all the participants. Participants mentioned being overwhelmed when they

returned to the pace of the United States as well as difficulty making the transition from being abroad to being back at home. Many of the participants also struggled with a lack of closure and a loss of familiar bonds from those they had grown close to over the duration of the trip.

### ***Subtheme 2.1: Lack of Closure***

All the participants mentioned and struggled with how abrupt they felt the trip ended, especially in light of the important relationships they had built with their peers during the trip. Hayden asserted that, “It ended very abrupt. There is no closure there with those relationships because I mean, we just never really had like a goodbye moment.” Hayden later recalled that,

It was not a satisfying ending at all. It was a very sad ending and it was crazy at the airport too, like a billion people were there and picking up others ... But I think ultimately I just felt sad and I think that’s part of the reason that made it hard for me to readjust back into even to my internship. I just felt sad that I had to leave the relationships I built with the people who were on the trip with me but also the people especially in [Country 1].

### ***Subtheme 2.2: Reverse Culture Shock***

Five of the six participants mentioned struggling with reverse culture shock upon their returns to the United States. Some of the students mentioned struggling with pace and expectations, whereas others mentioned having sensory overload. Hayden stated,

Coming back from another country is always hard. It was 4th of July and I think that made it even harder. Just this huge American celebration is going on as I’m coming back to America. Yeah, it was definitely hard. When you come back to a place that is just like the land of never ending things it kind of can be shocking at first and like oh wow, like

this is all like flooding me all of a sudden. I didn't notice how, extra America is. I didn't notice how showy America is until you come back into it after being gone for a long time. It definitely took a couple days for me to kind of readjust back into it. I did a lot more just reflecting back on the trip especially as I came back the first few weeks, I missed it a lot. I missed just the slowness of it.

According to Sterling,

It's hard to come back, you get, kind of this reverse culture shock, you come back here and you're like, dang, I don't need all these clothes, or I don't need to have random trinkets or like things like that. Coming back, the culture is so different. The government is so different. It's just, it's just a reverse culture shock, I say is the best, the best way to put that.

Hayden also remarked that,

It was the sensory overload, it was exhausting. I mean jet lag, of course, definitely sleep deprived from traveling for three days, I'm just really experiencing the moment a lot more presently and intentionally when I'm there versus when I'm back in America it is that sensory overload and you quickly get sucked back into it. I'm constantly having to just be on all the time.

On the other hand, one student reported the opposite. Whitney responded that "When I came back from [Country 1], there was no culture shock. And maybe part of that is because I just didn't have time to be shocked. Like, there was no time."

### ***Subtheme 2.3: Back to Work***

For all but one of the participants, the return home was a difficult transition and adjustment. The students also reported that it took them more time to readjust, especially coming back into internships and normal jobs. Some participants reported struggling with empathy for their clients in comparison to the major traumas they had just witnessed. Hayden recalled, “It definitely took me a lot longer than I think to readjust. I remember coming back into my internship and it was just hard to finish strong, I just had no motivation at that point.”

Participants also mentioned that due to reentry adjustment, at times it was more difficult to express empathy with clients, especially in comparison to the trafficked survivors that they had worked with during the service-learning trip. Hayden mentioned that “I don’t want to say I didn’t have empathy for them because I definitely still did, but it was almost just like man like things are just so much bigger than this one issue that you’re coming in with.”

#### ***Subtheme 2.4: Needing to Experience it to Understand***

Many of the students mentioned needing to experience the different cultures and the trip itself to fully understand the impact that it had on them. These direct interactions with the cultures and the people helped foster deeper awareness and understanding of other cultures and ways of life as well as led to increased questioning of their own values and ideas. Rory stated that “what I read, or what I studied was very different from experiencing it.” Arden reflected that

I don’t think there’s any way that you can really gain the perspective. I mean, you can see pictures. It’s one thing to see pictures and know that it’s out there. And another thing to actually step on the boat. You know and to sit with the people.

Whitney recalled that,

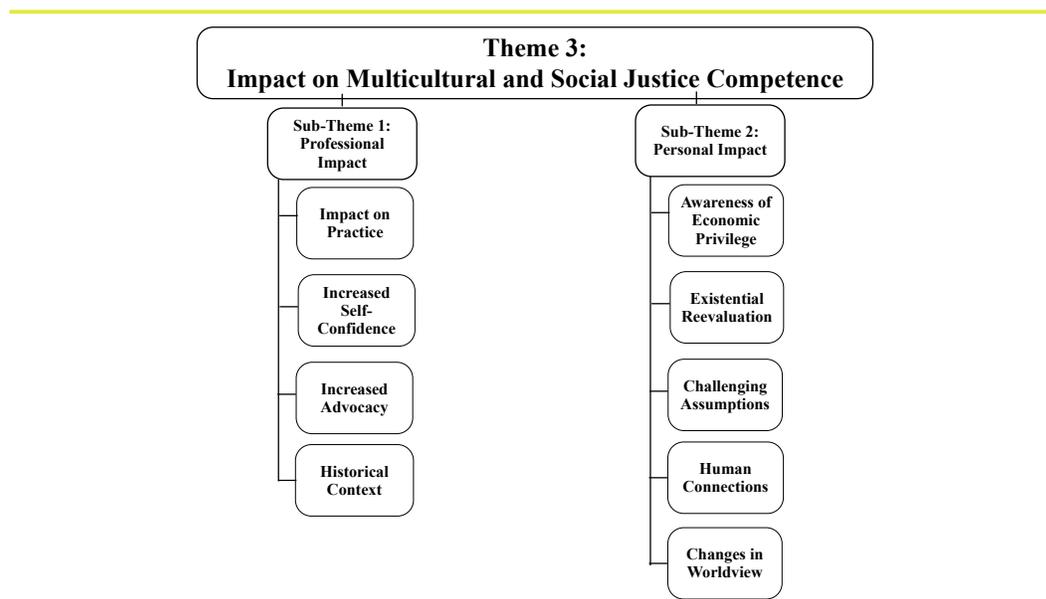
I think that there's a camaraderie, and understanding that comes when you experience something together, and try to explain the weight and magnitude of what happened during [the trip] that's not going to be understood by anybody, except for the people that experienced it.

Whitney further stated,

I'm gonna compare it to shepherd's pie. And depending on how you make it, the top layer is just mashed potato, ... but it's so much more than mashed potatoes with cheese on top. When you get into it, it's so dense, and sometimes, too much, you know? And unless you experience it, unless you just cut into it and take a bite and experience it, you don't understand it. And it was so heavy.

### **Theme 3: The Impact on Multicultural and Social Justice Competence**

Most of the participants expressed that they gained skills, developed new ways of thinking, and expanded thoughts and beliefs about themselves and their clients. Many of the



*Figure 4.5 Theme 3 Map of Sub-Themes*

participants reflected a deeper understanding of cultural needs as well as their own potential biases.

### ***Subtheme 3.1: Impact on Counseling***

Throughout the participants' interviews it became obvious that one area directly impacted by this trip was on their lives as counselors. Participants were able to further clarify their roles and aspects of their personalities as counselors and become better aware of what being a counselor means to them.

**Subtheme 3.1.1: Professional Impact.** The trip had a profound impact on many areas of the participants personal lives but also on their professional lives as counselors. Many of the participants mentioned that they would like to work with similar populations moving forward, whereas some were able to further define who they would want to work with. These comments reflect increased multicultural knowledge as well as expanded thoughts and beliefs. According to Hayden,

I do think ultimately I would want to work in a setting where I work ... with oppressed populations ... Working with those populations is something I want to do in the future and having that experience with the people that we did work with has given me a lot of insight on what to expect and stereotypes or preconceived notions that I may have had about going in to begin with.

Sterling remarked that,

I talk about this trip often actually and I would say [it's] a part of who I am, in terms of our goals and why we were there, the sex trafficking part is. I've thought about quitting

my job and working for nonprofits. I talk about it often and use those experiences ... with my normal counseling expertise, and I think it's part of who I am.

Hayden noticed that,

I just remember reflecting back on how I could use what I experienced in the setting that I was and I definitely found it hard to do that in the setting that I was in at that time. I know it kind of just made me reflect back on what I want to do in my field, what I want to do as a career moving forward, and what populations do I want to work with. I did a lot of really reflecting after that for sure.

On the other hand, one participant reported that this trip did not change the population they want to work with. Whitney stated that,

I don't necessarily think long term I have a heart for serving those people. But I still feel very much like I did help them when I was there. I felt like we did do something. There are some really great people that I met, and that I'm connected with on social media.

They live on the other side of the world, and they're cool. And I see them and, you know, pray for them. But I'm also okay, if I never see them again, like if, I've just been a part of their story, and they are part of mine for like a minute. That's cool, too, you know.

**Subtheme 3.1.2: Increased Advocacy.** Social justice advocacy has been recognized as an important fifth force of counseling, complementary to the psychodynamic, cognitive behavioral, existential-humanistic, and multicultural forces in counseling. During their interviews, participants grappled with heavy topics, and most found themselves in a position of wanting to advocate, or in a position of currently advocating for their clients. Arden noted,

And that's just that's just their reality, and I wondered what experiences they would have and how they would how they would survive and, I think all of us do have to come to a point that we accept what our reality is and change what we can and then help to give other people opportunities and whatever way we can afford them. I guess in our small way as privileged White Americans or just and not even White but just privileged Americans.

Arden further specified that,

I mean, that was hard to see but do we just turn a blind eye to reality for people, see I don't think so, that's where I think the social justice [comes in]. I think we need to advocate for. ... I believe that as human beings we all have the same basic needs, you know to love and to be loved for our physical and safety, you know shelter and really they weren't any different than I am.

Hayden mentioned,

there's just a lot of things going on in the world that we can so easily ignore or that we don't see in plain sight ... You still felt that impact it became a little bit more real, so coming back to America, I think it was just again hard for me to feel the intensity that certain clients felt about whatever their problem was and since then I think that's changed. I think I'm back in a place where it's like all right, like I can empathize with this person. I can see why this is a big deal or whatever it is, and I'm not comparing it to something else or to what I had to experience there and I think that's helped because of some distance that I've gotten between now and then from one time period.

**Subtheme 3.1.3: Increased Self-Confidence.** Participants' experiences leading groups and interacting directly with the culture increased participants' self-confidence and self-efficacy. Hayden recalled,

When we were in [Country 1], I would consider [it] my first real group, this was no longer practice, this is the real thing. I really don't remember specifically things I said. I just remember feeling really comfortable and really good about the questions I was asking and I got really good feedback. [Professor 2] probably gave me a big head after that because he really hyped me up even to like other people in the group ... but after I received the feedback from him. I don't know, I just felt like it broke down that impostor syndrome.

Hayden went on to say that

It was different because this is a clinical setting in a different country and so when I received that feedback from him, it kind of brought me back. Like maybe this is something I am good at and it kind of brought the joy back of doing group settings like that. That was just a group I will probably never forget. It just kind of stuck with me.

**Subtheme 3.1.4: Impact of Historical Context.** Participants noticed the impact of the country's recent genocide on the population as they worked with them. Rory reflected that

That couldn't have been experienced in the States. I'm seeing increasing the resilience of populations. And speaking of [Country 2], [where they are] still recovering from a genocide that happened less than two generations ago. And how even if they were hesitant to accept us, initially, we did grow in relationship with them and ending our

conference with games and dancing and laughing and showing them how to take care of themselves. Like that could not have happened if we weren't there.

Whitney also noted,

And even in [Country 2], we saw a lot of [trauma] and they just, went through a significant genocide, just a few generations ago. So the people that we were working with, their families had been split up or killed and so just the trauma that that whole country faced and just the oppression that they still felt even though they weren't under you know, dictatorship anymore. It was pretty significant and they were just searching for ways to help one another through that. But I also just felt that they were just so open to learning and wanting to know more. Whether it was about what we had to offer as mental health professionals, or even just what we had to offer as Christians.

### ***Subtheme 3.2: Impact on the Individual***

Equally important as their growth as counselors, participants saw growth in themselves. This growth changed the way they live their lives on the day-to-day level as well as how they interact with the world around them.

**Subtheme 3.2.1: Economic Privilege.** Several of the students mentioned struggling with a sense of economic privilege upon returning home. Rory stated that "I immediately went back to work ... at a pretty high end place in my hometown, and serving people who are ordering \$20–\$30 drinks and realizing that \$20 to \$30 could really help a large family in [Country 1]." Sterling remarked, "you come back here and you're like, dang, I don't need all these clothes or I don't need to have random trinkets or like things like that." Arden noted that "I came back and

remember being, man, I really shouldn't spend money on stupid stuff. Because these people, they don't have stuff and we spend money on stupid stuff."

**Subtheme 3.2.2: Existential Reevaluation.** Some of the participants struggled with the influences of differing religions, which caused them to question their faith, though others mentioned feeling as though their faith grew. Several participants mentioned that being exposed to other people actively engaged in different religions raised questions such as what people of other religions are finding that helps them be content. Therefore, throughout the trip participants grappled and viewed the spiritual component of the trip in both positive and negative ways. Rory stated,

I remember being at the [religious site] and hearing the tour guide tell us that...black magic is used so much that women aren't even allowed to step foot on that physical site, because it can be harmful to them. So it's really interesting to hear them talk about something so dangerous, they know that it's dangerous, and yet they still try to wield it to control it, honor it.

Rory later added,

So it kind of gave me more of a realistic vision of what different religions are and do. Because in those religions, there's a lot of talk about peace, but then how can peace come from something that's dark? So it just kind of created a lot of questions in my head?

Whitney added,

I was told that when I came home, expect spiritual warfare., and I don't know if I did or not ... I don't feel like I did in the sense that it was built up for me. So it almost makes

you question, was the trip really that impactful if I didn't have this super high level of spiritual warfare, but I don't necessarily think that's true, either.

Some participants struggled with understanding the reasoning behind why certain people were born into the life they were given, especially in relation to their faith. Arden noted,

In a way it's kind of a lottery. You're just born where you're born. I have some friends who are very very very upper class and those kids were born into that. Whereas like you know ... some of the kids are born into trafficking. Did either one of them earn or deserve where they were born, and yet their realities are gonna be just hugely different as far as opportunities and and expectations placed on them and what they expect out of life.

**Subtheme 3.2.3: Challenging Assumptions.** Seeing the marginalization was something that all participants mentioned as impactful. Along the same lines as spirituality, they had not expected to find individuals from a different faith background to be as peaceful and happy as they were. When speaking about oppression participants noted poverty but not despair, which produced cognitive dissonance. Pat recalled,

It's amazing how people who are treated the way that they're treated, can be so happy ... In the US, if you have people treated like that, they're a bunch of babies. They were just warm and welcoming. Just probably some of the happiest people I've run across is just kind of weird.

Pat also later reflected, "I actually miss ... the warmth and the acceptance. Overall, the people in [countries] both were just friendlier ... I want to go back. I fell in love with the people. in both places ... Everybody that we encountered was just so genuine."

**Subtheme 3.2.4: Human Connections.** Part of what made the trip so meaningful for many of the participants was the direct interactions and relationships that they were able to have with the locals. Participants mentioned these interactions throughout their interviews. Arden stated, “I liked the things that we were able to contribute [to the people we worked with], especially as we would break into groups. I loved working more in the intimate group with the people and I felt like ... it kind of leveled the playing field that it just became a human connection and I liked that.” Arden also expressed,

I loved to be a part of it. I loved being able to just feel a connection. With people, with human beings, even though we didn't speak the same language we didn't dress the same, our experiences ... our privilege wasn't the same, and yet we were still the same. There was still a connection that could be made. Just from a human to human.

**Subtheme 3.2.5: Interacting Changes Worldview.** Participants mentioned that interacting with the world changed their worldview. This also had the unintended consequence of changing how they view their peers and countrymen. Rory reflected,

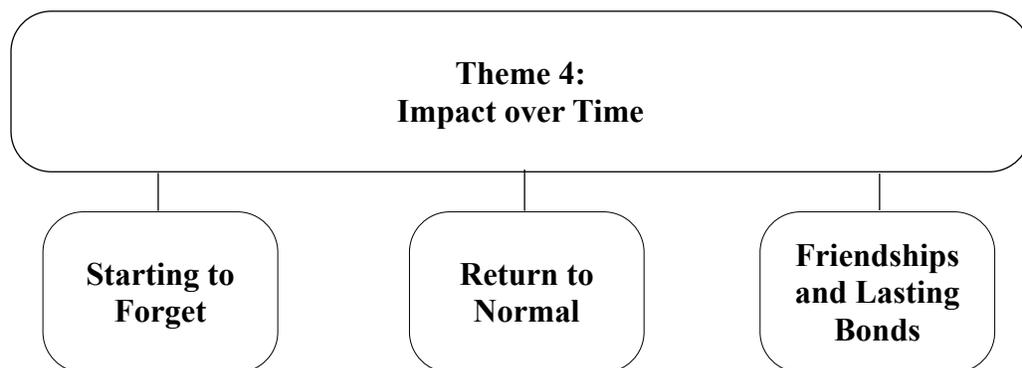
I don't have a feeling wheel but sad and a little bit of frustration, because I felt that if people looked outside themselves and traveled the world a little bit more, interacted with different people outside of what they're used to, their worldview might change a little bit. And how they spend money and interact with people.

Arden stated, “I think people when they don't have their eyes opened then they just think well that it's their own problem and they have a little bit harder stance on you know, what's fair or what's even needed?” Arden further clarified that

Yeah, so that was really eye opening. It also has helped color my view of just here in America what we experience. Just some of the things that we value and that we put up a big fuss over or the things that we get depressed over and not that I'm trying to discount other people's reality because it is their reality, but I think sometimes if people could look and see what reality is in the world for other people ... My first experience of poverty like that probably changed my worldview more drastically. It made me less judgmental ... because you don't know what they have lived.

#### **Theme 4: Impact over Time**

Although the trip had both positive and negative aspects, all the participants mentioned that they had positive gains from the experience. Most participants said that looking back on their memories, and knowing how it would go, they would still choose to do it all again, if only for the positives that they had gained from the experience.



*Figure 4.6 Theme 4 Map sub-themes*

#### ***Subtheme 4.1: Starting to Forget***

When talking about how they felt a year later, some of the participants mentioned that it is easy for the experiences to fade from the front of their memories. Hayden stated,

It's easy to kind of forget that experience and kind of move on with life. I think part of the American culture is that again like you just you come back and everything's fast-paced that you can quickly get swept up into the current and forget what happened and forget what you learned and how it's impacted you unless you're very intentional about reminding yourself we're putting yourself in situations that remind you of it.

Sterling reflected,

Now a year later, I'm starting to forget things. Talking in conversation is helping me think more about it intentionally. It's almost like things just go back to normal, which is really hard. I'm not completely normal, I think I'm always going to be a little bit different and changed because of the experiences I've had and the relationships with [people in Country 1].... You just kind of forget how it feels. And it's a weird feeling. It kind of almost makes you feel guilty, like you've done something wrong. But then you're kind of like, what can I do?

Sterling further stated,

It's a weird feeling, I think you get that any type of abroad trip that you go on working, especially one [like this] that has such a big impact on your heart, and you are hearing the stories of all the women or the men that we worked with, and I feel bad, I don't remember their names anymore. I don't remember some of the stories, and that part

makes me feel really bad. Then I kind of get really logical and that's just how my brain is, you know, it's just, it is what it is.

#### ***Subtheme 4.2: Return to Normal***

Participants also noticed that there is a return to normal and a lessening of the original culture shock. Sterling stated that “But I'm not as in shock, or the reverse culture shock as I was the week or month after, I'd say within six months, you go back to a normal state of living.” This returning to normal led to some of the participants to wonder about the impact that they had:

I wonder about those women ... what are they doing now? Are they taking care of themselves? Was what we did, Did it help? Did it stick? ... Or the children, what are they doing now? Are they okay? Do they have food? Do they have water? (Sterling)

#### ***Subtheme 4.3: Friendships and Lasting Bonds***

All the participants noted how important the friendships they made with teammates were even a year later after the trip. Hayden stated, “I definitely think about the experiences and the relationships I made and those stand out most to me, I remember them the easiest.” Pat also recalled that it was easy to quickly develop bonds with teammates: “It was cool to see how quickly we developed bonds. And not just shallow bonds, real bonds, and develop them pretty quickly while we were there.” Whitney also stated,

I am still friends with some of the people on the trip. I in some way shape or form do so reference it at times. Would I love to go back to Southeast Asia, yes ... But how do I feel a year later, I have some great people that are in my life that I still talk to. And I still love them very much. And I wouldn't trade them for the world. Like I would do that trip again, knowing what I know, and knowing how certain situations turned out. And even

how I experienced some hurt. I would in a second, do that trip again, just because of some of the friendships that I came out of it.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the qualitative thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clark (2006) that was used to answer the research question. The results of the thematic analysis included four themes and 25 subthemes. These themes and subthemes work together to describe the experiences that had a direct impact on the participants. The following chapter includes an evaluation of these findings as well as how these findings relate to the current literature and advance the knowledge in the field of counselor education. The chapter also contains recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this study, I explored how graduate students described the impact of their international cultural immersion experience on their perceptions of privilege and oppression. Information was gathered through participant interviews, which contributed to further insight into the impact of these students' experiences. Four sets of themes emerged from the interviews as well as 25 subthemes. The themes found were the impact of the culture, the impact of the group, the impact of reentry, the impact on multicultural skills, and the impact a year later.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings from the research question as well as the themes that emerged from the interviews of graduated counseling students after a service-learning trip abroad. Chapter 5 builds on the data analysis and results presented in Chapter 4 with a comparison of findings in this study to the current literature. I also discuss the implications for counselors and counselor educators. Finally, I discuss the limitations and recommendations for future literature.

### **Discussion**

There has been a lack of research on outcomes for service-learning cultural immersion trips and the impact on social justice advocacy. Given the importance of awareness of oppression and privilege in multicultural and social justice competence, this study was conducted to increase the existing knowledge base. This portion of the study will relate the themes that emerged from the participants' experiences to previous findings. Several of the themes found within this study were consistent with prior research on the impact of service-learning cultural immersion experiences and reentry experiences on multicultural competence development and social justice advocacy (Bell et al., 2016, Dorsett et al., 2019; Hadis, 2005; Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004, Pope-

Davis et al., 1997; Smith & Curry, 2011; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clark, 2010). Overall, the current literature on service-learning trips suggests that students' experiences tend to impact the domains of cognitive flexibility, self-awareness, and beliefs. These domains will form the foundation for the discussion of the themes presented as this study's findings in the following sections.

### **Theme 1: Impact of In-Country Experiences**

As the participants described their in-country experiences two themes emerged: the impact of their interactions with the culture and the impact of their interactions with the team. When discussing the impact of the culture, participants mentioned seeing class differences as well as differences in levels of income, traveling to various locations, learning about the political and economic structures of the countries, and interacting with individuals from that culture. When discussing the impact of the group while abroad and immersed in the culture, participants referenced the protective factors of team unity and self-care and feeling a need to be heard within the group.

#### ***Subtheme 1.1: Impact of the Culture***

Participants frequently discussed that directly experiencing the culture and the ways that the locals lived had a profound impact on their trip and their lives after the trip, which directly impacted their views about the country. The participants felt that the disparity and the living standards affected their trip and overall experience. This disparity brought up different feelings, leading some to feel uncomfortable and others to an increased desire to experience culture and live more like the experienced culture.

**Subtheme 1.1.1: Respect for Cultural Differences.** A vital component brought up in the context of the impact of the culture was the insight into cultural differences. Participants noted

that being culturally immersed allowed them to see a side of the culture they may not have seen otherwise, which influenced their views, values, and emotions. Participants talked about expanded personal views and a new respect for differing values in addition to changes in their values. Participants also showed an increase in counselor awareness of values and culturally appropriate interventions. Participants made comparisons to their home country in regard to freedoms, language, respect, and gender roles. For example, participants noted that in the experienced cultures women were a lot quieter, especially if men or people in positions of respect were around, so they had to specifically ask the women what their opinions were in group settings. Participants also noted that older people had a lot of respect compared to how the elderly can get treated in the states. These experiences made participants aware of how they cannot assume and need to be aware of cultural differences. Participants also referenced that the locals spoke English even though they only had knowledge of basic key phrases in the local dialect, which led to shame about not making more of an effort to learn the language ahead of time. This shows an increase in counselor awareness of values and culturally appropriate interventions (Sue & Sue, 2013).

**Subtheme 1.1.2: Class Differences.** Another component on the impact of the culture was the differences in class structure and social status. Participants were struck by seeing poverty and privilege adjacent to each other. Further, as the participants were able to build relationships with the locals, they became mindful and observant about racial prejudices that the locals may have been experiencing. In addition to discerning both the physical poverty and class systems, participants also gained an awareness of their own economic privilege, which gave them the opportunity to challenge their own points of view (Smith et al., 2014). Some participants also

mentioned feelings of guilt, especially in response to economic differences, which is consistent with previous research indicating that witnessing hardship and oppression as well as issues surrounding multicultural competence can lead to guilt, frustration, confusion, and even resistance (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clark, 2010; West-Olatunji et al., 2011). These experiences with drastic changes in environments have also been shown to lead to increased advocacy after returning to their home country (Jugens & McAuliffe, 2004).

**Subtheme 1.1.3: Two Extremes.** Participants also described a lack of a middle ground. Participants noted that their perception of the level of development of the countries impacted their views and in some cases created cognitive dissonance. This was evident because of the dichotomy in standards of living, with extreme poverty and extreme opulence being side by side. During the trip, participants had direct interactions with people who were living in refugee-like situations. Participants were thus able to become more cognizant of both privilege and oppression for both the cultures that they were experiencing during this trip and for themselves personally. Some study abroad research has found that in doing this intentionally, as well as allowing the students time to process and discuss what they are experiencing, can lead to gains in multicultural competence (Boyle et al., 1999)

**Subtheme 1.1.4: Awareness of Economic Privilege.** Participants noticed several signs of personal privilege over the course of their time abroad. Some of the more frequently mentioned signs of privilege included the ability to travel, safety and security, and access to disposable income. Participants discussed feeling uncomfortable because at times they felt undeserving of the special treatment they received, and mentioned that they were treated like royalty, especially when going out to eat. Participants discussed other instances of privilege such

as owners of stores changing the music to English when they arrived. Participants further discussed feeling uneasy with how inexpensive certain services were in comparison to what they would spend for those services in America, which often felt unfair and unjust.

### ***Subtheme 1.2: Impact of the Group***

Participants noticed that group dynamics were a vital part of the experience, especially while immersed in the culture. The students noticed a dichotomy in which they were both learning about how to interact with the culture around them and having to learn how to navigate the culture developed by their peer group. Several of the participants mentioned struggles with team unity and suppressed feelings. Most of the participants also mentioned that the friendships that they made on this trip were some of the most meaningful parts of the trip. Research has suggested that positive group dynamics can help students cope with feelings of discomfort and vulnerability that they may experience, whereas difficult group dynamics can detract from intercultural growth (Paras et al., 2019); however, there are few studies that addresses group dynamics during study abroad or cultural immersion trips.

**Subtheme 1.2.1: Team Unity.** Team unity and positive bonds acted as a buffer against some of the negative aspects of the trip. During the trip there was tension between certain members of the group, which made some participants uncomfortable and led to wanting to split from the group. However, participants mentioned that they would not have gotten through the stressful situations that occurred if it were not for the positive interactions with their peers. Participants discussed feeling supported by their teammates as well as a growth of deep and positive relationships. Participants also remained close to these positive relationships after the trip ended.

**Subtheme 1.2.2: Unresolved Conflicts.** During the trip, there were two significant incidents that seemed to fracture team unity and create added stress. When participants were faced with the added stress of working directly with the the complex trauma that the clients brought, this caused some in-group struggles. But some students chose to suppress their feeling. Often the participants wanted something to be done but were unsure the best way to appropriately handle these emotions. This caused frustration for some participants , though it also led to individual growth. However, participants discussed feeling like they were having to just persevere to get through difficult situations. Participants also discussed feeling as though they were not heard during certain parts of the trip.

**Subtheme 1.2.3: Self-Care.** Participants noted the need for self-care and the difficulty of finding both space and time for this. Many of the participants discussed how difficult it was to be constantly working and the added stress of seeing trauma through their clients' stories. Participants discussed feeling emotionally raw as well as burnt out, stressed, and tired. It is especially important for counselors to be able to take care of themselves, especially when working with trauma or when in a stressful situation such as being on an international trip. Currently there is little research on the impact of service learning study abroad and self-care; however, counselors are still aware of the importance of self-care.

## **Theme 2: Impact of Reentry**

Reentry can be a time of transition and growth for those returning from abroad. Reentry can be a time of re-acculturation, which can last for several months before returning to a baseline (Casteen, 2006). This is particularly relevant in longer term study abroad, as research suggests that those who adapted more strongly to their host country may experience more psychological

difficulty (Dykhous & Bikos, 2019). All the participants noted that reentry was difficult; as they acculturated back into their home participants noticed several challenges, which is consistent with the research (Weber, 2009).

### ***Subtheme 2.1: Lack of Closure***

Participants shared a sense of grief and loss upon returning to the states. Upon landing in the United States, the group members were separated as they went through customs, which left them unable to say goodbye or have any type of closure in their relationships. The feeling of support and team unity that was built in-country was suddenly over, and many of the participants feel unsatisfied and frustrated. Participants also felt a sense of grief and loss. These findings are consistent with prior studies that found that students experienced a sense of grief and loss upon reentry (Fanari & Foerster, 2021; Paras et al., 2019; Van Gorp et al., 2017). Peer relationships serve as an important aspect of both successful study abroad experiences and a smooth transition back into home life. This abrupt ending contributed to a feeling of loss with positive relationships gained but did also provide some relief over being able to escape negative relationships.

### ***Subtheme 2.2: Reverse Culture Shock***

Almost all the participants described being negatively impacted by reverse culture shock. Given the slower pace of the countries visited, most participants discussed how overwhelming the sights, sounds, and rapid pace were in their first few days home. Participants also discussed how difficult it was adjusting back to the immediacy, especially with being sleep deprived, the time change, and general travel stress. Participants felt as though they had to constantly be turned on and working at a higher level of processing than when they were overseas. Participants also

discussed having to re-acclurate back to their home after the experiences they had on the trip. Participants' feelings of overload in the American culture is in line with research on reentry experiences (Kartoshkina, 2015), culture shock (Adler, 1981), and physical, psychological, linguistic, and sociocultural difficulties (Sorti, 2003) that diminish over time (Fanari et al., 2020).

### ***Subtheme 2.3: Adjusting to Work***

Most participants shared that the return home was a difficult transition, especially in regard to personal relationships. Though reverse culture shock was more focused on the American culture and way of life, readjusting was more focused on the self and close family and friend relationships. Participants discussed needing time to readjust and a lack of motivation, which is in line with much of the research on reverse culture shock (Adler, 198; Dykhouse & Bikos, 2019; Kostohryz et al., 2014). This was compounded for many who returned immediately to work. Four of the six participants mentioned struggles with empathy on returning to the states, either with clients or with friends and family. Participants noted that problems and discomforts seemed negligible in comparison to the struggles of the visited countries (Arndt, 2019).

### ***Subtheme 2.4: Feeling Isolated***

Participants also noted that they did not feel understood by those with whom they might have wished to share details about the trip, which contributed to feelings of isolation. Participants discussed how they tried to describe the experiences they had on the trip with their friends, family, and coworkers, and were met with people who did not understand the breadth and depth of what was truly experienced. Many of the participants discussed that their family thought they had been on a vacation rather than an actual working service-learning trip. Many of the participants also felt as though the important peer relationships they had developed with people

who did understand were gone, which also contributed to feelings of isolation. Most of the participants discussed how they came to the realization that the only way they could be understood was by someone who had also experienced what they had experienced. These findings are consistent with prior studies suggesting that students experience a sense of grief and loss upon reentry (Fanari & Foerster, 2021; Van Gorp et al., 2017) as well as a difficulty sharing and explaining the depth and breadth of their experiences with others (Lester, 2001; Wathen & Kleist, 2015).

### **Theme 3: The Impact on Multicultural and Social Justice Competence**

As the participants described their in-country experiences, two themes emerged: the professional impact of the trip, and the personal impact of the trip. When discussing the impact on their professional life, participants mentioned finding themselves wanting to work with oppressed populations and increasing advocacy in addition to feeling improved self-confidence and a deeper awareness of the impact of historical trauma on the client. When discussing the impact on their personal life, participants noted signs of economic privilege, existential reevaluation, challenging previously held assumptions, an appreciation for the importance of the human connection, and changes to their worldview.

#### ***Subtheme 3.1: Impact on Counseling***

**Subtheme 3.1.1: Professional Impact.** All the participants mentioned the impact that this trip had on their professional lives, and most found themselves wanting to work with oppressed populations after their return. Participants discussed how the trip and the experiences of the service learning had become an integral part of who they are as counselors. Participants were able to use the counseling skills they gained overseas with their current clients and in

their current jobs. In addition, the importance of working with clients and self-care, which was learned about while on the trip, became an integral part of the participants' lives. Participants learned new ways to conceptualize self-care and continued utilizing this knowledge a year later.. Participants also found that they gained an awareness of being more culturally conscious and aware when working with clients. These is consistent with studies that suggest that study abroad trips impact career choice, social consciousness, and civic engagement (McGarrity, 2014; Paige et al., 2009).

**Subtheme 3.1.2: Increased Self-Confidence.** Several of the participants reported increased self-confidence directly stemming from the direct counseling intervention they were able to do and the clients they were able to interact with during the small groups and direct work they did with the local populations. One participant talked about how they experienced their first real group that was no longer practice, which built a sense of confidence and self-efficacy. Participants' ability to see that they maintained skills gained during their time on the trip built up their confidence. Participants' feeling an increase in their multicultural skills is consistent with the literature (Alexander et al., 2005; Burnett et al., 2004; Canfield et al., 2009; Cordero & Rodriguez 2009; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Ishii et al., 2009; Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004; Martin & Harrell, 2004; Platt, 2012; Tomlinson-Clarke, 1999). These hands-on moments help counselors feel more comfortable when engaging with diverse clients as well as increase their self-confidence and awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses (Jaoko, 2010). Research has supported that those who studied abroad were more confident in their levels of intercultural awareness and functional knowledge than their non-traveling peers (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). This can lead to a more nuanced understanding of clients (Xi, 2018), as some of the

participants pointed out.

**Subtheme 3.1.2: Increased Advocacy.** During their interviews, most participants found themselves in a position of wanting to advocate, or in a position of currently advocating for their clients as a result of this trip. Participants also noted that this service-learning trip has directly impacted their future goals as counselors and the way that they choose to advocate. Participants discussed wondering about the people they worked with, and wondering how they would survive. During the interviews, participants talked about what they could do to help and give other people opportunities, and their role as privileged Americans. Participants talked about how it's easy to turn a blind eye to other's marginalization. They became aware of how easy it would be to turn a blind eye because of their own privilege and this awareness was difficult. Participants also noticed that their increased cultural awareness left them unable to ignore signs of both privilege and marginalization in their home communities.

Participants grappled with the fact that they were not any different than their clients, except for where they were born, and participants struggled with the unfairness of the randomness of birth controlling so much. After returning home, participants also talked about struggling to find the empathy for people's problems in America since they seemed so much smaller. Cultural immersion experiences can challenge superficial cultural stereotypes and increase students' capacity to critically engage in the interplay among disadvantage, contextual factors, and sociopolitical structures by boosting critical reflection skills (Doresett et al., 2019). This trip also led to feelings of increased need for advocacy in many of the students. (Long et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2010)

**Subtheme 3.1.4: Impact of Historical Context.** Some of the participants mentioned an

awareness of the culture's history and the impact of the locals' history. This awareness is a vital part of a culture-centered approach to counseling, which emphasizes the fact that the client's culture is a foundational and integral part of the counseling process as well as shows a respect for diversity (Kaplan et al., 2014). Though the country has begun rebuilding and healing from a recent genocide, it was obvious to all the participants that the genocide had a lasting impact on the clients. When working with the clients during their time in Country 2, participants were able to hear the stories directly from people who lived through the genocide as well as children who grew up with parents who experienced the genocide. Participants expressed that they wished they had known more about the history of the country prior to going on the trip. Participants were shocked to see how evident the trauma was and gained an awareness of how historical oppression and violence can ripple through a community. Participants also discussed seeing the impact of the marginalization, especially their experiences with refugees. Participants mentioned how resilient the population and their clients were. Some participants recalled how these clients were somewhat hesitant at first to open up but then saw these relationships grow. Participants discussed searching for ways to help one another and wondering about the impact that they had on the clients. Participants also shared about how wonderful it was to see their relationships with the locals grow and change.

### ***Subtheme 3.2: Impact on the Individual***

Participants also gained increased knowledge about themselves, which is essential since the person of the counselor is one of the most important instruments for change (Platt, 2012). Consistent with the literature, participants showed increased cognitive complexity, self-efficacy, cultural awareness, and awareness of privilege.

**Subtheme 3.2.1: Economic Privilege.** Many participants discussed how the trip increased their awareness of their own economic privilege. After experiencing the extreme poverty, they shared how they became aware of their own spending habits, noting a decreased desire to spend money on extraneous goods and struggling with others' extraneous spending. Participants shared about how when faced with spending choices they often thought about how much further their money could go in the other countries or how the people they interacted with did not have the money and the privileges that they have. Thus, participants increased their awareness of their own economic privilege and the existence of both economic privilege and marginalization in their own communities. These impacts left the participants more socially conscious, which suggests a deeper awareness of one's self in relationship to privilege and oppression (Ratts, 2016).

**Subtheme 3.2.2: Existential Reevaluation.** One of the best ways individuals can understand other cultures is by critically examining their own. As part of developing multicultural skills, participants experienced struggles with long held values and beliefs and had come to terms with other cultures' religions as well as varying belief systems within the group. Participants struggled with reconciling values that clashed with their own but realized that humans all have the same basic needs for love, physical safety, and shelter. Participants were able to process through their own values during and after the trip, and many verbalized a recognition of the commonness of humanity. Because of the interactions the participants were able to have, participants were able to have a deeper understanding and clarification of many of their values and beliefs. However, some discussed the lack of expected spiritual warfare and whether the trip was not as impactful as it could have been. But all the participants where

challenged in terms of spirituality and religion. For some, it brought about a change of personal philosophy of life, and it helped them experience gains in cultural humility and respect for the person of the client. If religion and spirituality are not adequately addressed, the potential for development in intercultural skills can be missed, which can also cause students' feelings of grief and loss to be exacerbated (Unkule, 2018).

**Subtheme 3.2.3: Challenging Assumptions.** Participants were surprised that the people they interacted with could still be happy after being treated negatively by their country and experiencing trauma. Participants also reminisced about how warm and welcoming the locals seemed. Participants stated how they fell in love with the people, noting how much they miss them and their lifestyles and how much they would like to go back. As predominately non-Christian countries, there was a contentment that seemed to be grounded in their faith belief, which led many participants to challenge previously held assumptions. These feelings all led to participants mentioning how much their assumptions were challenged throughout the course of the trip. Participants reported having their own views challenged through critical reflection and reframing their perceptions which gives them a greater ability to develop cultural views that are more inclusive and less ethnocentric (Smith et al., 2014).

**Subtheme 3.2.4: Human Connections.** One of the core facets of counseling is the relationship between the counselor and the client. The participants were able to build relationships with the people of the countries visited as well as the members of their group through one-on-one time and small groups. All the participants mentioned the importance of these gained connections, which caused them to feel like they could find a common ground and relate on a much more authentic level.

Study abroad programs can offer counselor education students the opportunity to better understand culture, tradition, language, and many more aspects of the communities they engage with during the experience (Barden & Cashwell, 2014). Direct connections are a large part of what makes service-learning experiences so impactful (Platt, 2012). Students who studied abroad were able to increase their knowledge of the host country and increase their tolerance of others through experiential learning and interactions (Guth et al., 2012; Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004; Tomlinson-Clark & Clark, 2010). Counselor education students who engaged in immersion experiences have also reported an increase in multicultural awareness as well as multicultural sensitivity as a result of their experience (Canfield et al., 2009). In the Pope and Davis (1997) model there are five key components that build multicultural counseling competencies: pre-deployment training, sustained time in the field, interaction with culturally diverse others, genuineness/depth of relationships formed, and reflection. During the interviews, participants mentioned these components either directly or indirectly. From their experiences, participants gained a greater awareness of the importance of building relationships, finding commonality and a deeper understanding of the culture.

**Subtheme 3.2.5: Interacting Changes Worldview.** Many of the participants described ways in which the trip and the interactions they had with the people and the culture changed their world view. Many of the participants shared how the trip had impacted how they spend money and how they interact with people. Participants also disclosed how the trip had changed their thoughts about what was important, expressing frustration that if more people learned and interacted with different people as they had done, then perhaps their worldview might change as well. Participants stated that after the trip they had their eyes opened to what American values

really were, broadening their personal beliefs about their and other cultures (see Biniecki & Conceição, 2014; Chavez et al., 2003; Soulard et al., 2020). They realized that they changed but their community did not, so their values were not consistent with those around them. Participants also mentioned being both more and less judgmental depending on the situations. Research supports the participants' feelings, showing that international travel can lead to reassessment of personal identity and foster global citizens (Butcher, 2009; Rogers et al., 2020).

#### **Theme 4: The Impact Over Time**

When discussing the impact over time, participants mentioned feeling that certain aspects of their trip were fading from their memory. Participants also discussed a feeling of returning to normal as well as the lasting impact of the bonds they made during their time overseas. Service-learning trips and cultural immersion trips can play a vital role in counselor education by facilitation of growth in multicultural competence. During their interviews, participants noticed the impact that the trip has had over time as well as feelings of returning to normal and the lasting bonds created by this trip (Wathen & Kleist, 2015).

##### ***Subtheme 4.1: Starting to Forget***

Participants noticed that it was easy for the trip to fade from their memories, especially if they did not talk about it often. Some participants did find ways to mention the trip or incorporate aspects into their daily lives as counselors. For one of the participants this was one of the first times they were actively able to talk about the trip with someone who they felt understood by. Participants noticed that now, a year later, it was easy to recall certain things, but they are also starting to forget, which caused some to feel guilt. Participants shared about how important it is to be intentional, especially in regard to how fast paced the American culture is in

comparison to the visited country's way of life. They also mentioned that they will always be a bit changed because of the large impact the trip had on them.

#### ***Subtheme 4.2: Return to Normal***

Similarly, participants recalled that while there was originally some reverse culture shock, now that is starting to fade. This return to normal had participants thinking about if the impact they felt they may have made on their clients during their time abroad was also fading.

#### ***Subtheme 4.3: Friendships and Lasting Bonds***

Though there was group tension at times, all the participants noted how important the friendships they made with teammates were, even a year later after the trip. These bonds were important enough that participants said that they would do the worst parts of the trip over again, just to gain these bonds. Many of the participants stayed in contact with one another and often go to each other for peer mentoring from their fellow counselors. Participants stated that the relationships they built stand out the most and that they quickly developed real meaningful deep bonds.

### **Implications for Counselor Educators and Recommendations**

Social justice advocacy has been recognized as an important force of counseling, complementary to the psychodynamic, cognitive behavioral, existential-humanistic, and multicultural forces in counseling. Counselor educators can use service-learning experiences to help their students gain multicultural skills and increase their awareness of social justice advocacy, which will prepare them to work with clients from a variety of backgrounds. Research looking at international service learning has shown that not only do students gain a greater understanding of how culture plays a role in relationships, attitudes, and values, but that having

an abroad experience aids in participants becoming more aware of the roles of privilege and oppression (Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004; McDowell et al., 2012). The best way to gain perspectives on other cultures is to travel and immerse oneself into that culture (Gerstein & Ægisdóttir, 2007). The common thread from service learning and cultural immersions is that cultural knowledge is created and passed through human connection (Platt, 2012). Consciousness raising and the idea that a dialogical approach is the best (Berryman, 1987). The service-learning experience can act as a mirror, increasing future counselors' awareness of their self and cultural context (Martin-Baro, 1994).

Counselor self-awareness, client worldview, counseling relationship, and counseling and advocacy interventions are the groundwork for the MSJCCs. An additional piece of the MSJCCs involve attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and actions. Participants in this study all made gains in all areas of multicultural competence. In their interviews, participants directly discussed how this trip increased their awareness of their social identities, social group statuses, values, and beliefs. Students also mentioned that this trip has directly impacted their future goals as counselors and the way that they choose to advocate. Participants were able to develop knowledge of how historical events and current issues shaped their clients' daily lives as well as how clients' communication styles can be influenced by their privileged or marginalized status. Participants were able to acknowledge their strengths and limitations in knowledge as well as express a desire to learn more about these gaps in knowledge.

Group dynamics was one of the more impactful parts of this trip for some of the participants. In future study abroad trips there should be a focus on the importance of team dynamics and finding space to let participants be heard. Participants also mentioned the need for

self-care; thus, finding ways of incorporating self-care before, during, and after the trip remains important.

Most of the participants also mentioned a distinct lack of closure and how the abruptness of the ending negatively impacted them. Space to debrief remains important as is making sure that participants feel heard and understood. Pre- and post-trip meetings can give space to discuss reentry and potential implications of reentry such as the need to set aside dedicated time to resettle both physically and mentally. Further, struggles during the reentry process could be aided through journal writing and more focus on processing through groups before, during, and especially after the service-learning trip. Reentry struggles can be mitigated through psychoeducation during pre- and post-reentry programming. But individual and contextual factors impacting reentry are largely unexamined, which could be an area for further research. More research is also needed on what makes a pre-trip training successful.

Despite ways that service-learning trips can be improved, all the participants mentioned that in some way this trip has impacted them on a professional level, with most of the students wanting to work with oppressed populations. Participants mentioned gaining self-confidence in their clinical skills, especially in regard to getting to lead groups and sessions in the country with the locals. This may have led to changes in empathy when returning to the states. Several participants mentioned changes in empathy upon return, and this could be a promising area of research.

An area of importance for the persistence of gains is allowing and creating a space for participants to share their stories. Many of the participants mentioned that going back intentionally during these interviews was allowing them to recall things they may have

previously forgotten about. Some of the participants mentioned talking about the trip frequently and using the skills they learned in their current clinical practices, whereas other students mentioned not really talking about the trip at all. Research on what makes this difference could be insightful. There also should be ways to promote student reflection after the trip as well as incorporating this during the trip as well.

Additionally, instead of placing a negative focus on culture shock, reverse culture shock, or spiritual warfare, emphasis can be placed on having a growth mindset to frame these periods as a time for self-exploration and values clarification. By encouraging travelers to use these times of potentially negative emotions in a positive reframing manner, counseling students can gain deeper understanding of themselves and the world they live in, intentionally focusing on developing a self-awareness about privilege and marginalization in cultural immersion experiences. Therefore, international service-learning experiences will create an environment for counselors to explore their cultural competency through rich cultural interactions, developing meaningful bonds and relationships and increased self-awareness.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to the study and its finding, as with most research. This study has a limited sample, with all the students attending one university and all on the same trip. Due to the research style, the interview process may have limited the participants' discussion or recall as well as the fact that the trip occurred a year before. Interview questions were used as a guide, which may have limited the potential comments that participants may have otherwise discussed. Furthermore, participants may have attempted to answer in a socially desirable manner. Additionally, my involvement in the trip as a participant may have influenced my interpretations

of the information given. To help overcome this, my chair and committee reviewed the information, with member triangulation for data strengthening (see Cresswell, 2009).

### **Summary**

This chapter served to further tie the themes together as well as compare the findings in this study with current literature. This study was conducted to examine master's level counseling students' perceptions of an international cultural immersion experience impacted their perceptions of privilege and oppression. Findings showed that study abroad service-learning programs have the ability to promote gains in multicultural competence. MSJCC competencies are part of the foundations that make effective multiculturally component counselors. Through service-learning experiences counselors can experience environments and cultures that are different from their own and gain insight and awareness on privilege, marginalization, and attitudes and beliefs that could impact the counseling relationship. Counselor education can be enhanced by service-learning experiences, which allow participants to enhance and broaden their worldview and practice from a multicultural counseling competency perspective.

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