Social Justice and Advocacy Training for Counselors:

Using Outreach to Achieve Praxis

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2007

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present recommendations for conducting outreach in order to further the efforts in the counseling field towards social justice and advocacy. Informed by Freire's (2000) critical consciousness theory, examples of culturally centered counseling services are presented as outcomes of the experiences of participants. These projects, conducted in the post-Katrina Gulf Coast region, resulted in the establishment of specific recommendations for future clinical outreach endeavors that promote community empowerment, self-determination, and resiliency. Future research can expand on the themes noted in order to continue to promote social justice outreach within the field of counseling.

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The field of counseling is moving to incorporate advocacy and social justice into its profession. As such, clients are now being served in innovative ways that include programs with an emphasis on prevention and advocacy (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels & D'Andrea, 2003). Recently, the counseling profession has moved to include advocacy in the scope of its endeavors and its identity (Kaplan, 2002; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). However, advocacy without critical thinking and action (praxis) can result in mere activism that fails to achieve the true ideals of social justice (Freire, 2000). Training opportunities that allow counselors to develop critical consciousness and engage in praxis provide a method through which counselors can develop true social justice and effective advocacy. This paper will provide recommendations for augmenting counselor training to include experiences that allow counselor-trainees to develop the skills for advocacy and social justice through outreach.

Social justice and advocacy have become critical elements of the counseling profession (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Action for social justice involves cultural competence that can be achieved through gaining critical consciousness (D'Andrea, 2005; Ivey & Collins, 2003). Using theory-guided action followed by reflection engenders the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 2000). Service learning literature and practice demonstrates the importance of engaged activities as learning experiences for counselors. Service learning fosters the development of clinical skills (Arman & Scherer, 2002) and cultural competence (Arredondo et al., 1996; Burnett, Hammel & Long, 2004; Hagan, 2004; Musucci & Renner, 2000; Roysircar, Gard, Hubbell & Ortega, 2005). Service learning also allows participants to engage with communities in a ways that is collaborative and empowering (Pope-Davis, Breaux & Liu, 1997; Weah,

Simmons & Hall, 2000) and that produces connectedness between the community and the service providers (Burnett et al.; Roysircar et al.).

As a type of service learning, an outreach experience can be a useful way in which counselors can engage in social justice. To ensure that the outreach involves true social justice and advocacy instead of mere activism, critical consciousness can be used as a guiding philosophy. Thus, the authors developed two outreach projects which used critical consciousness as the theoretical framework to provide counseling services to communities impacted by Hurricane Katrina. In the first outreach project, seven clinical psychology students and two faculty members traveled to the Gulf Coast region in March 2006. They provided counseling services at a hotel in New Orleans and also volunteered outside of the city helping to rebuild a community. The second outreach project occurred in August 2006 and included ten graduate students from counseling-related fields and two faculty members. This team provided counseling services to the faculty and staff at a charter school in New Orleans.

Based on these two outreach projects, the authors have developed five areas of attention for others planning outreach projects. The recommendations can assist project planners in developing an outreach that is based on the ideals social justice and advocacy through the foundation of critical consciousness. Addressing these five issues will allow for the creation of an outreach in which participants are effective service providers. First, preparatory planning can be used to develop the outreach and organize its participants in an effective manner. Second, partnerships can be established in order to collaborate with resource providers and the community being served. Third, group process issues are addressed that create an atmosphere of growth and development for the participants. Fourth, the outreach planners prepare the outreach

site by collaborating with the community. Finally, clinical protocols are established that ensure

participants will provide empowerment-focused services to the community.

*Preparatory Planning*

In order to conduct an outreach experience that will provide a training experience for

critical thinking and the execution of social justice, careful preparatory planning is needed. To

serve this purpose, the outreach must be aligned with the needs of the community. Thus,

assessing the community's needs is the first step in preparatory planning (Lewis et al., 2003;

Author, 1999). Furthermore, when working with marginalized groups, needs assessments are

especially important as mainstream assumptions about the community's needs are often

inaccurate (Khamphakdy-Brown, Jones, Nilsson, Russell, & Klevens, 2006). In the second pilot

project conducted in the Gulf Coast region, outreach planners asked a local university faculty

member to conduct interviews of key school stakeholders to determine the needs of the school

community. The expressed needs included the school staff members' desires to assist

traumatized children and also to manage ongoing personal and professional stressors. Thus the

outreach planners were able to discuss these expressed needs with the outreach participants and

prepare the team to respond appropriately.

Outreach team preparation was part of larger aspect of preparatory planning, which is the

training and orienting of participants. In addition to practical considerations and knowledge, the

participants need to be oriented to the outreach philosophy and objectives. The purpose of using

liberation psychology based on critical consciousness is a key factor in creating an outreach that

embodies social justice and is not simply activism (Ivey & Collins, 2003). As part of this,

preparatory training will clarify that the team will work collaboratively with the community for

empowerment, and not treat community members as passive objects (Freire, 2000). Instead of

offering charity or performing a service, the outreach participants will experience reciprocity

with the community for mutual benefit (Weah et al., 2000).

*Establishing Partnerships*

A second important component of creating an outreach endeavor to develop social justice

is to establish partnerships. Partnering with other organizations that also have an interest in

offering such a service can provide resources that allow for greater service delivery (Watson,

Church, Darville & Darville, 1997). As the field of counseling expands from its traditional scope

of practice (Lewis et al., 2003), collaboration with partners who have experience providing

service in innovative and community-responsive ways is advantageous to the objectives of the

counseling profession in general. In both of the pilot projects to the Gulf Coast, the outreach

teams partnered with organizations within their own communities in order to gain resources and

expertise. In the case of the second pilot project, the local university provided monetary support

for lodging, as well as supplies, transportations, and liability insurance.

In additional to partnering with organizations, outreach endeavors can also benefit from

establishing partnerships with the community being served. As mentioned in the first

recommendation, the objective of the outreach is to create a collaborative framework where

participants are truly engaging in social justice. Collaboration and consultation between the

community and the outreach participants throughout the project is central to this endeavor

(Lewis et al., 2003). As such, working with community stakeholders can create an outreach

project that empowers the community to be a partner in developing and implementing solutions

to expressed problems (Kalayjian, 1994; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998; Weah et al., 2000). In both

outreach pilot projects, the community stakeholders and members were included in the

discussion of needs and solution development. Community members were an integral part of

implementing these interventions on an ongoing basis and refining them throughout.

*Addressing Group Process*

The third area to address in creating an outreach that engages in social justice is to

address group process. Group process is central to the learning process for outreach participants,

as it is through processing as a group that participants engage in giving and receiving feedback to

and from one another (Burnett et al., 2004). Group process also process allows outreach

participants to reflect on their outreach work. This is particularly important when working with

culturally different clients in that reflection in group process aids in developing cultural

competence (Roysircar et al., 2005). In order to allow for the development of group process it is

important that group cohesion is fostered through attention to group dynamics (Yalom & Leszcz,

2005). Group homogeneity (Lieberman, Wizlenburg, Golant & Di Minno, 2005) and culture

(Steward, 1993) are both aspects of group dynamics requiring attention. Both outreach projects

sought to address group process in order to create a climate of reflection. Daily group process

sessions and discussions about group dynamics were used to foster an atmosphere where

participants could dialogue and engage with one another and the clinical supervisor. These

procedures helped the participants develop culturally competent counseling skills.

*Preparing the Outreach Site*

Site preparation is a fourth aspect that outreach planners can attend to in creating social

justice outreach opportunities. First, site preparation involves gathering information from the

community, as the community is the best source of information about itself (Vera, Daly,

Gonzales, Morgan & Thakral, 2006). Thus, the outreach team may conduct an assessment of the

community's needs (Lewis at al., 2003), as well as use collaborative ethnographies to dialogue

with the community (Lassiter, 2004; Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Mattis & Quizon, 2005; Author, 1999).

Second, outreach site preparation involves preparing for participants to enter the site. Outreach

planners can link with a trusted community member in order to gain credibility (Vera et al.) and

establish a collaborative relationship (Weah et al., 2000). As the members of both outreach

projects were from outside the community, the planners linked with a trusted community

member in order to gain entrance into the community. This community member facilitated the

needs assessment and collaborative partnership, which created an effective relationship for

service provision.

*Establishing Clinical Procedures*

The fifth recommendation for creating an outreach is to establish clinical protocols.

Empowerment-focused counseling is a key clinical protocol, as community members are the

ideal problem-solving agents for their own problems (Lewis et al., 2003; Vera et al., 2006).

Clinical protocols also can include a focus on reflection and self-awareness, both keys to

providing culturally competent counseling services (Arredondo et al., 1996; Roysircar et al.,

2005). These clinical protocols were used during both outreach projects to ensure that

participants were able to provide effective, culturally competent mental health services. Daily

group process sessions focused on reflection and awareness and also discussed clinical

conceptualization and interventions that facilitated empowerment.

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

*Significance*

The recommendations presented from these two pilot outreach projects demonstrate that

counselors can indeed engage in social justice and advocacy. While there is still a dearth of

literature on how to engage in outreach, this paper provides a foundation based on Freire's

(2000) critical consciousness from which outreach planners can organize projects what will move beyond mere activism. One important outcome of using this model for outreach projects is that outreach participants engage with communities as collaborative partners and in ways that focus on empowerment. The participants are not there to "fix" a community, but to assist a community in finding its own solution. Thus the solutions developed are sustainable long after the outreach participants have gone home.

Furthermore, incorporating an emphasis on reflection and critical thinking within the group of outreach participants creates a group dynamic that allows the participants to dialogue and expand their knowledge. The participants can assist one another, model clinical skills for one another, and provide peer mentoring. This dynamic, engaged relationship among the participants empowers the participants to create new knowledge of their own through their lived experiences. The participants are thus empowered to use their new knowledge in their future clinical work, as well as in social justice and advocacy activities.

*Future Research*

There is a need for more research on outreach projects in order to continue to expand this new knowledge. As both projects presented were in the United States, future research should focus on international outreach in order to determine if outcomes and recommendations differ. Also, both projects deployed participants for just over one week, so questions remain as to how an outreach might differ if deployment was for a longer time period. Furthermore, future research should also seek to understand the perspective of community members and how they perceive the outreach participants and their effectiveness in the outreach.

In sum, purposeful preparation is necessary for a meaningful and effective outreach (Lewis et al., 2003; Vera et al., 2005). These recommendations provide a foundation for future

outreach endeavors. As social justice and outreach are clearly important elements of the counseling profession, these ideas will serve as a foundation for future research. Further development of these concepts can allow counselors to continue to improve the ways in which they work for social justice through outreach and advocacy.

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