Coping With Fear

Counselors Achieving Professional Growth in Working with DACA/DREAMers, Immigration, & Refugees

Suzanne A. Whitehead, Virginia Montero Hernandez, & Taylor Whitehead

Introduction

There has been a tremendous increase in the debate regarding who should be allowed to move to the United States, for how long, where persons may come from, and if they should become rightful citizens. This article focuses on a study that was conducted at a university in the western U.S. The purpose was to investigate current counselor education students' and recent graduates' experiences in counseling recipients of benefits under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)/Development, Relief, and Education for Minors (DREAM) Act, legal/illegal immigrants, and refugees. The study highlighted fledging counselors' ethnocentric phenomenological worldviews of how they discovered the best ways to assist and support their clients in coping with these difficult issues, while grappling with their own personal struggles, many of whom were DACA recipients themselves.

Suzanne A. Whitehead is an associate professor and program coordinator of counselor education in the Advanced Studies in Education Department, Virginia Montero Hernandez is an associate professor in the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and director of the Center for Excellence in Graduate Education, and Taylor Whitehead is a health educator and doctoral student, all in the College of Education at California State University, Stanislaus, Turlock, California.

The researchers purposefully chose this population of counselors rather than those with more than five years of experience because we wanted to learn how novice counselors worked through their own struggles to share suggestions with those who followed. In addition, the researchers were interested in finding out, through their own accounts, if the skills the new counselors and trainees developed were successful in helping them cope with the stresses of assisting undocumented immigrants.

Literature Review

Background of DACA/DREAMers

In 2010, the DREAM Act failed to pass the U.S. House of Representatives. It would have specified a six-year path for illegal immigrants to eventually become citizens if they were brought to the U.S. before the age of 16 years, were pursuing education or military service, had been in the country five years continuously, had no criminal record, and would be between the ages of 12 and 35 years at the time of the bill's enactment. While the DREAM Act failed, the name pursued, and the term now generally applies to immigrants under the age of 35 years seeking legalization/amnesty and/or taxpayer-subsidized tuition (Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform, 2017).

In 2012, President Obama implemented the DACA program by executive order to offer protections for DREAMers. The Migration Policy Institute (2017) has estimated that there are 1.2 million DREAMers who have been offered two years of amnesty (a stay of deportation), which has been renewable. There are approximately 1.8 million immigrants currently in the U.S. who might meet the requirements of DACA when they are older (American Immigration Council, 2012; Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform, 2017).

Statistics

A 2010 Census Bureau report revealed that 12.9% of the overall U.S. population was comprised of foreign-born residents, a total of 39.9 million persons (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011; Rowland & Davis, 2014). For DACA recipients, Mexico has been the largest source of accepted applicants (n > 600,000), followed by El Salvador (n = 31,963), Guatemala (n = 22,821), and Honduras (n = 21,053 (National Education Association, 2017, p. 5). Almost half of the potential DACA beneficiaries live in California and Texas; however, there are significant numbers living in every state across the country.

DACA recipients have been able to come out of the shadows and obtain valid driver's licenses, enroll in college, and legally secure jobs. They also receive a Social Security number, are allowed to apply for work permits, and pay income taxes. Some immigrant rights' advocates, however, criticize the program, stating it leaves people in limbo (American Immigration Council, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2017).

As of 2010, one out of every five children in the U.S. lives in a family in which either one or both parents are immigrants

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2011; Rowland & Davis, 2014). Approximately 690,000 young adults are currently protected under the DACA program, and officials processed more than 34,000 additional first-time applications in the fall of 2017 (Shoichet, Cullinane, & Kopan, 2017).

The Plight of Refugees and Immigrants

In addition to the steady flow of immigrants that the U.S. receives from the south (Mexico and Central America), as of 2013, war and persecution have created the highest number of global refugees since World War II (51.2 million people; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014). Most refugees are from Syria, Central Africa, and southern Sudan. Fearing persecution, they flee to escape intolerable conditions; therefore displacement and premigration trauma are critical considerations when counselors work with refugees and their families.

> Displacement and premigration situations of war and conflict may involve witnessing or being subjected to torture, killings, atrocities, incarceration, starvation/deprivation (e.g., food, shelter), rape, sexual assault, and physical beatings. Many refugees experience multiple traumatic events. (Bemak & Chung, 2017, pp. 299–300)

The psychological effects of immigration include not only the culture shock but also a permanent condition of acculturative stress (Chung & Epstein, 2014; Sirin, Ryce, Gupta, & Rogers-Sirin, 2013). Immigrants, especially children, begin to feel the pain of separation and loss of their homeland as the newness of their journeys and surroundings begins to sink in (Arredondo-Dowd, 1981).

Additionally, they struggle to find healthy and nonthreatening ways to integrate their culture and that of the receiving country (Sirin et al., 2013). Children of unauthorized immigrants live in constant fear that their parents might be arrested, detained, or deported; this continual distress affects their daily lives, education, health, futures, and sense of normalcy and stability (Chaudry et al., 2017).

Effects of Negative Distress Accumulation

Children may not know why their lives are in turmoil and their parents are scared; when children do not fully understand, they blame themselves and become scared, too (Scudder, 2017). In addition, Scudder elaborated,

> We know that fear and stress, particularly the prolonged exposure to serious stress known as "toxic stress," can harm developing brains and negatively affect short- and long-term health. In particular, we may see immediate changes that reflect stress: changes in bodily functions, such as sleeping, eating, and toileting behaviors; behavioral changes, such as detachment, anxiety, or exaggerated responses; and developmental or learning problems, such as tantrums or limited working memory. In the short term, we may also see physical complaints (headaches, nausea, and other neurologic symptoms) and indicators of mental distress. Over time, toxic stress places children at risk for serious problems, including heart disease, diabetes, and depression. (para. 4)

The devastating effects of negative stress can have long-lasting implications and complications that often stem from life circumstances.

> Crises may alter the fabric of a person's life, challenging one's sense of being, reality, and routine while requiring adaptation to an altered way of life. In this way, some crises leave permanent scars. (Young & Cashwell, 2017, p. 255)

Study Design

Demographics

The study took place in a small to mid-size university in the western U.S. The university is a Hispanic-serving institution, which is a federal program designed to support colleges and universities that assist first-generation, majority low-income Hispanic students through grant money and subsidies. At the university, more than 240 enrolled students have self-identified as DACA recipients; however, supervisors in the financial aid and admissions departments believe that the figure is actually much higher, projecting it to be in excess of 500 students.

Methodology

The study was constructed through the lens of a constructivist and humanistic perspective, and the qualitative portion utilized a phenomenological and ethnographical theoretical framework in which the participants constructed their own realties and prescribed subjective meaning to their events (Alreck & Settle, 2004; Creswell, 1998). The researchers created a 10-item questionnaire that included a demographic section.

The questionnaire included the following four dimensions: current professional experiences with populations exposed to sensitive immigrant-related issues, emotional reactions experienced as part of the professional practice, strategies implemented to work with clients, and recommendations for other counseling professionals. The questionnaire items were open-ended questions that provided the respondents the opportunity to broadly describe their experiences, feelings, and perceptions and was field-tested by 10 participants prior to its dissemination.

The questionnaire was e-mailed to all currently enrolled counseling students and recent graduates from the previous five years. Students' and graduates' responses were anonymous, and all responses were kept in a locked, password-protected computer database. The questionnaire was left open for access for approximately four weeks in April and May 2017.

The rationale for including current graduate students plus recent graduates in the study was to ascertain how trainees and newer counselors were coping with the stressors outlined in this study. It was important to the researchers to discover if current teaching pedagogies were deemed sufficient in helping trainees and graduates to successfully cope with these stressors, as described by their own words and experiences. It was also important to ascertain the personal growth that was taking place in newer graduates and trainees, based on their responses to the questionnaire.

Return Rate

A total of 243 online questionnaires were sent out via the Qualtrics Survey

Program from the university with n = 36 (~15%) returned. The responses were analyzed on two different occasions, using interrater reliability, and the cogent themes were processed and evaluated.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Responses

The first five questions of the survey related to demographics. The responses indicated that 11 participants identified as female (31%), seven identified as male (19%), and 18 did not answer. Five persons stated they were in the 20–29 year age category (42%); five persons were in the 30–39 age category; five persons were in the 40–49 age category; two persons were in the 50–59 age category; and 19 persons declined to answer the question. One person in the sample identified as Asian American, three people were European American, and the largest group included nine people identified as Hispanic/Latinx (25%). Four identified as two or more races, and 19 persons declined to provide such data.

Fifteen participants answered that they were current counselor education students, two answered that they were recent graduates, and 19 declined to comment. Thus 42% of those who responded stated they were current students, the largest group. While some of the participants had not been formally hired as counselors yet (22%), they had engaged in counseling practice as part of their field experience seminars in the master's program. Twenty-five percent of the sample had between one and five years of experience as counselors; the rest of the participants did not disclose information about this dimension.

Qualitative Responses

The open-ended questions were analyzed based on the expectation that participants' responses are representative of their personal phenomenological sense making and frameworks. In the field of communication theory, Burke (1996) proposed his notion of *terministic screens* as being an individual's perception and symbolic action in the world. This theory directed our attention to the specific language that persons use to describe their circumstances (p. 44).

Counseling theories, especially those that are existential–humanistic in nature, also support the idea that individuals use their personal interpretations to make sense of themselves and the world around them. In *narrative therapy*, the emphasis is on allowing clients to tell their full stories in their own words, think about their perceived outcomes, and work together with the counselor to adjust their trajectory and endings (White & Epston, 1990).

In *logo therapy* the main premise is for clients to find their own sense of meaning, despite the pain and suffering they may have endured, and to remain focused on pursuing a meaningful existence and purpose in life (Frankl, 1984). The qualitative responses to the questionnaire reflected deep meaning, personal stories, and self-reflection, incorporating a synthesis of the theoretical perspectives mentioned above.

An examination of the participants' responses revealed that there were four main themes: (a) crisis prompting professionals to redefine the complexity of clients' issues; (b) identification of resources, limitations, and knowledge gaps; (c) responsiveness to emotional self-awareness; and (d) professional approaches that cultivate empathy. Responses which were considered especially representative by the researchers are discussed below with each theme.

Theme 1: Crisis Prompts Professionals to Redefine the Complexity of Clients' Issues

Several respondents reflected on the notion that there was great complexity in comprehending their clients' immigration-related issues and that multiple layers existed when dealing with a perceived crisis and trauma. They often became aware of these complexities in working with the children, teenagers, and young adults whose relatives were undocumented immigrants and shared that they were constantly fearing deportation and separation from their families.

Counselors faced the challenges of understanding what it means for their clients to live under permanent anxiety due to the possibility that the reality as they know it can change on any given day, and that they have to be ready to face an unknown destiny. This was evidenced by some of the responses:

> At the junior high level, I've had students come to my office to voice concerns regarding their undocumented parents being deported, and students being absent from class instruction due to their parents' fears of their children being targeted for deportation.

Another respondent emphasized the several life dimensions that are affected as a result of facing the fear of deportation:

> My experiences with undocumented immigrants have been that there are many barriers for them. I feel it is much harder for them to get access to financial aid and health care . . . On top of that, they have to deal with the emotional issues of, *Are they going to be arrested, or are their family members going to be arrested and sent back to Mexico?* I have students that their families already have a plan in place in case they get deported, and it is hard for them to focus on school if they do not feel safe.

When addressing concerns with children regarding absenteeism from school, the issues became quite real and very intense, prompting a need for further analysis by counselors. Besides noting that there are mandatory school attendance laws in every state, the reasons for student absenteeism have now become incredibly complex and nebulous.

Participant responses also reflected a crisis of self in acknowledging their own vulnerability in dealing with immigration issues, while trying to be there for others. One stated: "Many of my family members are currently, or were, undocumented immigrants." Added another: "I work at a high school, and we have been experiencing a higher number of enrolled refugees over the past six months." New counselors and trainees suddenly found themselves in unchartered territory, traversing these changing issues with perhaps little or no background or training. An initial problem was how to understand the characteristics of the immigration-related reality they experienced on a daily basis.

Overall, responses reflected a yearning by graduate and student counselors to try to explore each aspect of what their clients were experiencing, to be able to respond in the most effective and

helpful manner possible, and to learn how to reach out to other professionals as needed:

> The best suggestion I have used is asking for help from professionals I trust. If I feel uncomfortable with my client, specifically someone undocumented or refugee status, I will approach one of my colleagues with experience. Sometimes I do not know how to approach some folks depending on their background.

As with all the questions and responses, the participants in this study demonstrated great compassion and a desire to address their clients' needs from a proactive stance. The great complexity that surrounded the clients' issues was reflected in these responses as well:

> Children are in fear that they might be separated from their parents. Parents are worried about being separated from their children. People without documentation worry about being able to continue to work in this country and have a constant fear of being deported.

Fear can be a great motivating factor toward desired change; however, excessive amounts of fear become immobilizing and terrifying. Learning how to manage vicarious stress for counselors is paramount for their continued efficacy in successfully helping their clients. "Practicing self-care can decrease counselors' risk for vicarious traumatization, burn-out, compassion fatigue, and other symptoms of distress" (Young & Cashwell, 2017, p. 280).

Theme 2: Identification of Resources, Limitations, and Knowledge Gaps

Through their work with migrant students and their family situations, counselors learned to identify gaps in their own knowledge. While they were aware of the therapeutic possibilities they could implement with their clients, they also became aware that they lacked skills that were necessary to interact with and support this population effectively.

Counselors identified three learning dimensions as potential areas of improvement if they wanted to be able to work effectively with migrant families: development of second language skills, acquisition of migration-related information, and understanding of culturally based experiences. Counselors acknowledged that engagement in each one of these learning dimensions would be necessary to implement essential counseling-based practices.

The following quotation is a representative example of the identified knowledge gaps:

> Their paperwork and financial aid applications are different, so you need to get familiar with them. Also, there are many times where their parents do not speak English, so communication can be challenging. You also need to be sensitive to their cultural differences.

Counselors noted that their language limitations in their interactions with clients was one of the most detrimental knowledge gaps. The lack of mutual understanding created frustration among counselors, as they were not able to communicate and provide support as they wished. Without the ability to be part of a symmetrical dialogue, both students and counselors felt hesitant about how to operate:

> The language barrier is the most significant challenge when working with undocumented immigrants and/or refugees (including their families) from Middle Eastern and East Asian countries. I've also experienced their reluctance to open up to teachers, counselors, and/or school staff for fear of deportation or trust issues.

Counselors worried about not only their lack of ability to speak the language of their clients but also their clients' struggle to understand the dominant language; counselors were empathetic of the language struggle that clients felt as new members of an English-speaking community:

> One of the major stressors assisting undocumented immigrants has been to see their frustrations about dealing with learning in English and getting their education in a language different from their own. It frustrates me that I can't help them any better, even with all the help that is offered by the school and the district.

The lack of communication made it very difficult to provide therapeutic solutions for clients: "Students and families don't want to disclose personal information. There is less communication within undocumented immigrants and/or refugees." A critical part of the counselor–client relationship is mutual trust. However, without the ability to communicate effectively with students, counselors found it difficult to build the necessary rapport: "The language barrier, gaining their trust, and a lack of knowledge of the issues are very challenging."

Language barriers were often a difficulty and source of frustration and stress as counselors tried to build the counselor–client relationship. Without an open and two-way communication flow, they felt it was difficult to set up the foundations for therapeutic intervention:

> It helps to know the settings for the counseling session. It is best to be somewhere relaxing for the client and counselor.

Language differences became a critical barrier for the construction of bridges between counselor and client. Without the ability to become proficient in the client's language, counselors viewed their practice as compromised:

> The lack of ability to communicate as quickly as possible is very stressful. It is difficult to ensure that your communication is being understood effectively.

The opportunity to overcome this knowledge gap (i.e., linguistic barrier) was critical for counselors to be able to exert their practice:

> I think the language barrier is the most difficult thing, but having someone translating and assisting is very helpful.

The second most frequently mentioned challenge by the counselors was the lack of understanding of immigration regulations and processes. Without the expertise to understand the immigration status and requirements of some of their clients, counselors struggled to define their courses of action:

> One challenge I can think of is not having enough time to help them out with their needs, not knowing if they will be deported.

Some counselors not only witnessed the struggle of their clients but also experienced the fear of deportation themselves. The lack of knowledge about immigration-related issues created uncertainty about possible futures:

> For me, I have felt lots of tension and anxiety. I fear for what the future holds for my family who is immigrant, and for all those children whose lives can be affected by separating families. I also fear how my children will be affected when they see their friends and family members being deported (if that were to be the case in the future).

The unique and sensitive situation of each client made it complicated for the counselors to act as a liaison or institutional agent who could suggest sources of support or information for the client. Counselors had to navigate existing systems by inquiring about the particular conditions of immigrant students:

> Some of the challenges I have experienced with counseling undocumented immigrants are getting them health services since they do not qualify for some services unless it is an emergency. Another challenge I have experienced is when filling out the financial aid, they have to use different forms and if they already applied through the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] website, they have to call and have it erased so they can apply through the DREAM Act website. Also, if they have parents that are undocumented and they are documented, they have to fill out extra forms to get financial aid.

Counselors emphasized that once they identified their knowledge gaps, they felt responsible for looking for accurate sources of information. They wanted to provide an informed service to their clients. Counselors reaffirmed their need to be self-directed learners who had to actively seek out information:

> The best suggestion I have used is asking for help from professionals I trust. If I feel uncomfortable with my client, specifically someone undocumented or refugee status, I will approach one of my colleagues with experience. Sometimes, I do not know how to approach some folks depending on their background. For example, if I had to assist a family who dealt with bombings in their neighborhood, it would be useful to know the best approach to dealing with any loss or grief for that family. Another challenge could be religion or political influences. I would want to gather information relevant to that family's understanding and beliefs regarding their reality.

Counselors tapped into their ability to learn and sought sources of information that could enrich their perspectives about the experiences of the immigrants. One participant responded by acknowledging that "providing other outside resources who specialize in working with this population [is important]. I have also attended trainings and seminar sessions on this population." Another counselor noted,

> Doing my research and keeping up with the new laws has been helpful. Also, providing any undocumented immigrants with resources and giving them hope is an excellent way to assist them. . . I have attended trainings to gather information and resources to use with DREAMers. Joining Listservs and consulting with others has also been helpful.

Counselors emphasized the necessity to engage in educational practices that allowed them to enrich their understanding of the regulatory framework concerning undocumented immigrants:

> I also try to educate myself about the immigration and naturalization laws to better inform family, friends, and students . . . using kindnesses, and obtaining information on the UN human rights.

Finally, counselors realized that often they did not have an accurate understanding of the cultural, social, and economic reasons that encouraged families to move across countries and risk their personal safety to pursue a higher quality of life. Counselors identified their lack of understanding about the cultural realities from which many of their clients emanate:

> I have learned the undocumented immigrants come to this country for the American dream. They come from places with *no opportunity*, so coming to the United States allows them the chance to work and support their family. They come from countries with no infrastructure, so they cannot find jobs in their country of origin. They come here with the hopes of finding work and are willing to work in hard labor jobs making little or no money.

Counselors emphasized that learning about their clients' life journeys and family backgrounds was an eye-opener and a critical opportunity to expand their ability to support members of that community:

> Many of the students I have assisted have been our top students. These students also plan on becoming naturalized citizens once they can afford it. It has been enlightening to learn from these students and what some of their families have sacrificed for their child to have a better life.

Knowledge gained about the cultural reality of migrant students provided counselors with improved opportunities to design their therapeutic services. "Usually, if I know the status of the people I serve, it helps me make better decisions. For example, I helped a little girl once, whose family came from Mexico," replied one of the respondents.

These observations point out the learning opportunities in which counselors can engage when crises emerge and individuals have few references to respond. As professionals, counselors realized areas of improvement that required a long-term commitment (e.g., learning a second language) and areas they could immediately address (e.g., learning about regulations and service) to enrich their professional service to undocumented immigrants and refugees.

Finally, counselors realized that through their interactions with these vulnerable populations, they could increase their cultural awareness and multicultural competencies about the unique life experiences that members of these populations have embraced.

Theme 3: Responsiveness to Emotional Self-Awareness

Responses from the graduate and student counselors related to emotional

self-awareness struck a very self-reflective chord for many. Their replies indicated a deep emotional awareness about their clients' challenges. This awareness facilitated deeper understanding of human collaboration, crisis, and trauma:

> It has been very enlightening to learn about their journeys into the United States. . . There are many Assyrians that are refugees; I have worked with these people and felt they provided some unique and important perspectives about politics and society.

A stark realization of the abject fear the counselees felt came through in many of the responses: "I have witnessed a lot of induced worry and fear;" "Students and families that I come in contact with are scared and hesitant to provide any personal information."

Many respondents stated their way to cope with such fear was to reach out for help:

> The only times I usually feel the most stress is whenever I am assisting families and individuals alone. I usually find that being part of groups or having a group conversation is best.

Another counselor lamented, "One challenge I can think of is not having enough time to help them out on their needs, not knowing if they will be deported."

The impact of accumulated negative distress for the participants was noted in such responses as: "Keeping up-to-date with changes is stressful!" "Hearing children feeling powerless to help their families, and negative thinking when it comes to the future." So, too, communication issues became their own stressors for all parties.

The responses of the counselor participants indicate considerable challenge, frustration, and concern in wanting to help their clients in the best ways possible. They also provided insight into the counselors' characters, as they were determined to find the correct information and resources for their clients, no matter the obstacles.

While the situations they faced in working with their clients seemed extremely challenging at times, the counselors did not give up and, in fact, were oftentimes prompted even more to find the best solutions possible:

> For me, the main emotional feeling has been frustration and weariness for people who may be in jeopardy to losing everything. It is heartbreaking to know that many people's (children and adults) lives can be drastically affected negatively by a simple change in the legislature. I have family and friends who came to this country in hopes of finding a better life. They are good people who have never been involved in the criminal justice system, pay their taxes, and are great role models to others. However, just because they were not born here and have not been legalized, their entire future is at stake.

A common thread was noted as follows: "I feel that the recent changes in the presidency have made it difficult for people that are currently undocumented. Many families are worried about being separated and fear for their stability. Undocumented people worry about being deported." Some respondents stated the best way for them to cope was to obtain some distance from the constant news and remain steadfast in seeking wellness and self-care:

> For me, what has been helpful is to stay away from the newscast related to this topic. The more that I learn about the negative things happening, the more anxiety I get. My husband keeps me posted on news by streaming the information that I need to know. I also try to educate myself about the immigration and naturalization laws to better inform family, friends, and students.

Another participant responded reflectively: "Some successful strategies to cope with the stressors and challenges in assisting undocumented immigrants are during my commute home being able to drive and listen to loud music so I can let go of what I am feeling, and exercising to take out my frustration." Having time to debrief from and process the ever-present concerns and fear throughout the day helped maintain balance, a sense of purpose, and the courage to face their work anew.

These answers demonstrated counselors' ability to be in touch with their own emotional responses toward these challenging situations. This ability is particularly important to acknowledge because counselors need to monitor themselves for the purpose of self-care, wellness, and emotional burnout.

Without the ability to identify, assess, and respond to their own emerging emotions, counselors can struggle to create responsive therapeutic alternatives for their clients. As a result, counselors who face emerging humanitarian crises also learn to observe themselves and their ability to respond, while emotionally adapting to the contextual demands.

Theme 4: Professional Approaches That Cultivate Empathy

The ability to cultivate empathy for each and every client with whom a counselor works, taking into account the client's situation, background, culture, obstacles, or differences, is crucial to being an effective, empathic, helpful, and culturally competent therapist. The responses the graduate and student counselors gave revealed that they were touched deeply and significantly, which helped them relate to their clients on the most intimate of levels: "Being a child of undocumented parents, but are now citizens of the U.S., this has brought about my empathy for these students." Other participants also demonstrated this empathetic response:

> Most of my experience has been on a personal level; however, I have also witnessed local church cases of students who are afraid they will be deported and their families separated. I have family members, as well as friends (age range 7–30) who have been greatly affected by the new administration where their rights under DACA may be jeopardized. It is heartbreaking to see young children worrying about themselves, their families, or even their friends who may be in this type of situation. . . . During the first few weeks of the 2016 election, my students were having anxiety symptoms (unable to sleep, nightmares, wordiness during the day, unable to focus in class). Furthermore, my own children would come home from school talking about their

> friends not attending school because they thought they would be deported.

In addition, getting in touch with participants' own vulnerabilities and trying to successfully cope brought their own struggles to the fore.

The responses indicated the desire and intention of counselors to operate with a sense of dignity, compassion, empathy, and regard for the clients with whom they work. Their replies were saturated with feeling-based words that manifest the sense of connection they felt to their clients. Counselors built relationships with their clients, not allowing the fear of the unknown to impede their vital work; they persevered despite difficult challenges and their own frustrations.

A counselor's resilient self is a sign of an outstanding, compassionate, and humanistic professional approach. The realization and expression of a humanistic approach is particularly important to the people who are experiencing trauma. Additional indications of empathetic responses include the following:

> I find a profound interest in assisting/counseling undocumented immigrants and/or refugees as it reminds me of the immense difficulty I too experienced when I lived in a foreign country and was undocumented.
>
> I am sensitive and understanding to the students and families. I am also a first-generation graduate; therefore, I can relate to many students and families on a personal level.

Counselors emphasized the importance of establishing an empathetic professional approach to understand the conditions and needs of their clients:

> Be compassionate, because you never know what a person has faced. Be kind, because everyone deserves to be treated with kindness and respect. Be helpful, because everyone deserves to have services.

Another respondent added,

> Be open minded and sensitive to this population; sometimes these students do not know they are undocumented until they file for a DACA or financial aid. Try to build a strong rapport with these students so they will be willing to share their struggle with you.

Counselors pointed out that empathy was an important expression of care that could provide emotional support to their clients: "Be empathetic and understanding to their needs, educate yourself about the issues, and try your best to help them because showing that you care is important." In addition to establishing an empathetic professional approach, counselor participants also wanted to share their suggestions to help fellow student counselors who are finding their way in dealing with these complex issues:

> Three suggestions that I could share with other counselor/trainees in assisting/counseling undocumented immigrants and/or refugees are:
>
> 1. Do your best in understanding what they are going through; it has not been easy for them to have left their home country, friends, and family.
>
> 2. Remember that this is the country that opens its doors to immigrants and those in need, so open your heart to them and help them knowing that you have been trained in some of the best college in our nation.
>
> 3. Help them the same way you would have wished you could have gotten help if you were in another country. Of course, you don't need to experience the same in order to help them. Get to know them and learn about their culture and customs. Remember cultural awareness!

Another participant responded with similar suggestions:

> Three specific suggestions I could share with other counselors or trainees are: to have patience, to make sure to ask students, especially seniors, about their status to be able to best serve them toward their future goals, and to not limit the student because of their immigration status.

True empathy can be cultivated, but never disingenuously. The participants in this study were not afraid to discuss their own vulnerabilities, while acknowledging they knew it was paramount to address their fears to be as effective as possible for themselves, their families, and those they served.

Summary Points

Participants' responses poignantly indicated the distresses that new graduates and counseling students were facing in dealing with their own fears, as well as for those they counseled. Four cogent themes surfaced as being highly representative of the respondents' deepest concerns:

1. Crisis prompting professionals to redefine the complexity of clients' issue.

2. Identification of resources, limitations, and knowledge gaps.

3. Responsiveness to emotional self-awareness.

4. Professional approaches that cultivate empathy.

These four themes revealed that counseling practice is a professional endeavor that requires constant redefinition and improvement. As new humanitarian crises emerge (e.g., social displacements due to war and economic crisis) in our societies, the role of counselors becomes crucial to help human groups achieve psychological well-being in the midst of traumatic situations.

The unique experiences that illegal immigrants, refugees, and their families experience constitute an emerging and increasingly important social concern that forces counselors to understand their clients better, to identify and address their limitations, to be in contact with their own emotional responses, and to understand the importance of empathy in the construction of their practice.

Counselors who worked with DACA recipients, undocumented immigrants, and refugees, and experienced their vicarious distress saw this all as an opportunity to identify and expand areas of their professional and personal growth.

Limitations

One of the greatest limitations of this study was its return rate of 15% of the sample population. It was determined that the timing of the dissemination of the study just before finals week and graduation, as well as not having an up-to-date e-mail list for previous graduates for the last five years, limited

the number of responses. In addition, it is significant to note that 18 of the respondents (approximately 7%) declined to answer the demographic questions, which may have affected the interpretation of the quantitative data.

In reading over the qualitative responses, the researchers wondered if this reluctance of respondents to supply demograhic information was because the respondents were fearful of such information being used against them because some may be DACA reciopients, as well. This may be an area to consider addressing in follow-up studies.

Implications for Counseling Programs

One participant summed up the overall feelings of the study succinctly by stating, "Be open, stay current on the laws, stay empathic, and remember: we were all immigrants once in our heritage." It is without question an important premise of which to be mindful as we endeavor to help every person who is in need of counseling services. In addition, this topic is an ongoing, complicated issue, fraught with much emotion, inconsistencies, mixed information, heartache, pain, distress, and fear. We must be sensitive to the concerns of undocumented immigrants and refugees, as well as those who are trying to help and counsel them.

It is clearly evident from the responses and opinions of the participants in this research study that fear is real, ever present, palpable, and, perhaps, a struggle to keep in check at times. It is incumbent on ourselves as educators to assess the toll that our students are experiencing, both personally and professionally, in working with these issues. We also must be confident in our own counseling skills so as not to be afraid to address these issues in a proactive, nurturing, and empowering manner.

Suggestions for Further Research

It would be prudent to conduct continued research regarding best practices in working with our students, be they counselors, teachers, or whatever discipline, to increase their knowledge base, multicultural competencies, and compassion in working with those in need. As evidenced by the national media, the status of DACA, immigrants, and refugees has been changing rapidly, sometimes daily; therefore keeping up with the latest information is paramount to deliver optimum and proactive counseling services to all those who are impacted.

Additionally, it is important that further research be conducted for faculty members to be able to address these difficult conversations in their classrooms with their students, understanding that they too can experience much duress and concern at times regarding preserving fairness, equity, human rights, social justice, and equality for every person, no matter his or her heritage.

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