

**Measuring Ethical Sensitivity to Racial and
Gender Intolerance in Schools**

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Abstract

Professional school counselors must increasingly be prepared to work in more racially and ethnically diverse school settings. At the same time, most school counselor trainees continue to be from the dominant culture, raising the likelihood of culture clashes and ethical violations. This article describes the use of a computer version of a measure of ethical sensitivity to racial and gender intolerance, the Racial Ethical Sensitivity Test – Compact Disk (REST-CD; Sirin, Brabeck, Satiani, & Rogers-Serin, 2003) with school counselor interns. A study of 54 school counselor interns showed that courses in professional ethics and multicultural issues were positively related to scores on the REST-CD. Implications for training and directions for future research are discussed.

Measuring Ethical Sensitivity to Racial and Gender Intolerance in Schools

As demographic shifts occur in the United States, schools are undergoing significant population changes that mirror changes in the broader society: greater numbers of minority students as a result of immigration and other factors. At the same time, the majority of master's level counseling students, as well as professional school counselors, continue to be Caucasian women (Hill, 2003). Research findings suggest that members of this majority group are both less knowledgeable about multicultural issues and less multiculturally aware than minority group members (Yeh & Arora, 2003). Between 1972 and 2007, the percentage of public school students who were White decreased from 78 to 56 percent (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). It is anticipated that by 2023, more than half of all school age children will be minorities, classified as those of any race other than non-Hispanic, single race Whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Statistics from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights underscore the reality that bigotry, bias, and racism are daily occurrences in our nation's schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2008) (. Professional school counselors are on the front lines of this changing landscape, and often find themselves unprepared to deal successfully with this reality (Hayes & Paisley, 2002).

In response to the potential impact of increased diversity on the counseling profession, Sue, Arrendondo, and McDavis (1992) constructed 31 multicultural counseling competencies (MCCs) to introduce counselors to more effective ways to serve ethnic minorities. These competencies were designed to ensure counselors'

abilities to attend to cultural factors in clients' lives and in their counseling relationships. In the MCC standards, Sue et al. argued that counselors should be self-aware, examine their beliefs and attitudes regarding other cultures, understand how various forms of oppression influence counseling, and use culturally appropriate assessments and interventions.

Culture clashes between majority counselors and minority students may be inevitable, but these misunderstandings do not have to be miseducative. Knowledge of ethics for professional school counselors is critical because it can mean the difference regarding whether students receive appropriate or inappropriate services, and are treated with respect and dignity. The *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005) in Section H.1.a states:

Counselors understand the ACA Code of Ethics and other applicable codes from other professional organizations or from certification and licensure bodies of which they are members. Lack of knowledge or understanding of an ethical responsibility is not a defense against a charge of unethical conduct. (p. 18)

Researchers (e.g., McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Sue et al., 1992) have suggested that in order for school professionals to be effective with diverse populations, they must first be aware of their own racial and cultural biases. This awareness, or ethical sensitivity, is a necessary first step towards moral behavior. Rest (1986) suggested that morality should not be viewed as a unitary process, but rather as a multifaceted phenomenon comprised of four interrelated psychological components. According to Rest, ethical sensitivity involves first recognizing different possible courses of action and the ways these choices will affect concerned parties.

Rest (1986) proposed a four component model in which ethical sensitivity, moral judgment, motivation, and implementation predict or explain moral behavior. The first component and focus of this study, ethical sensitivity, involves awareness of the moral dimensions of an issue. This occurs through awareness of existing codes of ethics, regulations or laws, as well as interpretation of complex situations through social perspective taking.

Rest's (1986) second component, moral judgment, involves the ability to provide a sound rationale for one's decision about a moral problem. Recent research focused on promoting moral judgment in counselor trainees working with diverse populations (e.g., Cannon, 2008; Halverson, Miars, & Livneh, 2006) has demonstrated that this component is relatively impervious to change. These researchers have argued that this may be because students often lack a self-directed central accountability for the tasks and challenges associated with cultural competence, such as reducing bias or coping with shame and guilt.

Rest's (1986) third component, moral motivation, involves identity formation and the integration of personal values with professional ones. The fourth component, implementation, is often described as moral character or moral courage. Self-regulation of emotions is particularly relevant to moral implementation in the counseling profession, where one's role involves work with racially and culturally diverse clients who are experiencing academic difficulties, intense emotions, anxiety, or whose judgment may be impaired by substance abuse (Rest & Narvaez, 1994).

In today's complex environment, professional school counselors must navigate numerous ethical quandaries or dilemmas, particularly those related to racial and

cultural differences. According to Constantine (2002), there is a paucity of empirically based information that discusses how well-prepared professional school counselors are to work with diverse students. Previous research in this area (e.g., Constantine & Yeh, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Salzman & D'Andrea, 2001) focused on increasing tolerance, embracing diversity, and overcoming stereotypes, yielded mixed results. Sirin, Brabeck, Satiani, & Rogers-Serin (2003) have argued that most efforts to increase tolerance and cultural competence have appealed to the changing demographics and increased diversity in the United States but have not offered a rationale based on professional ethics. Arguably, if aspiring professional school counselors understand that their profession expects certain ethically defensible behavior, they are more likely to adopt these behaviors. In fact, within professional psychology, it has been demonstrated that knowledge of professional ethics increases ethical behavior (Rest & Narvaez, 1994).

Purpose of the Current Study

Specific to the field of professional school counseling, there appears to be a deficiency in the literature relating to ethics training. Remley (2002) reported that the ASCA magazine publication *School Counselor* does include a regular column on legal and ethical issues. However, an EBSCO host database search of *Professional School Counseling* using the key term “ethics” retrieved only 12 peer-reviewed articles, and a search using the key term “ethical” yielded 18 peer-reviewed articles. None of these articles discussed counselor training.

Regarding ethical issues, Bodenhorn (2006) noted that the most common focus of recent *Professional School Counseling* articles was confidentiality, followed by

considerations of student and counselor spirituality; protecting students from harm and violence; and practicing competently through receiving supervision. Conspicuously absent was an intentional focus on the ethical issues raised by majority culture counselors working with diverse student populations. As Constantine (2002) has noted, school counseling has generally not attended to “race-related attitudinal issues in the context of empirical investigations” (p. 163). The present study attempted to bridge that gap.

The purpose of this study was to measure school counselor interns' levels of awareness of racial and gender intolerance in schools using a computerized version of a measure of ethical sensitivity to racial and gender intolerance, the Racial Ethical Sensitivity Test-Compact Disk (REST-CD; Sirin et al., 2003). Specifically, I tested the hypothesis that participants who had taken a multicultural issues class, as well as an ethics class, would be better able to recognize racial and gender intolerance, as measured by the REST-CD.

Method

Participants

Fifty-four students from three medium-sized metropolitan Northeastern universities participated in this study. The sample included 15 male and 39 female students whose ages ranged from 24 to 46 years ($M = 28$, $SD = 4$). Participants were mostly Caucasian ($n = 42$, 77%) and female ($n = 39$, 72%), but the sample was also 11% Asian American, 5% African American, and 6% who identified their racial/ethnic group as “other.” Of the participants, 48% reported an annual income of \$40,000 or less, 32% reported between \$40,000 and \$70,000, and 20% reported \$70,000 or more.

Materials and Procedure

The REST-CD (Sirin et al., 2003) is a computerized version of the original REST (Brabeck et al., 2000) and is designed to assess individuals' abilities to identify ethical violations in various school based scenarios. Following a review of the research literature, a professional playwright developed scripts portraying scenarios in which school personnel violate the ethical principles of school-based professional codes. Participants view the scenarios and are then prompted by a videotaped interviewer to type their responses directly onto the computer using Word. Each participant answers the same questions in the same order.

The REST-CD consists of an introduction, three scenarios, and an interactive video with a graphic user interface that provides standardized instructions to participants. The program saves all of the data entered by participants on a separate flash drive. Once the CD is started, the user is prompted to enter his or her unique ID number, gender, and the date of the session. Each scenario is presented twice so that participants have the opportunity to take notes and absorb as much information as possible. Next, a randomly assigned interviewer from the CD (either male or female) asks the participants a series of questions about what they just viewed. Once the interviewer asks each question, participants type their responses into a text window. Each scenario takes approximately 30 minutes to complete.

In order to validate the original REST, Brabeck et al. (2000) assessed participant interviews for ethical issues identified and the complexity with which participants analyzed the issues. Inter-rater reliability ranged from $\alpha = .80$ to 1.00. Raters discussed items on which they did not agree until they agreed on a single score. In addition to an

initial administration of the REST, participants were re-administered the REST two weeks later and also completed a measure of knowledge and awareness about issues impacting ethnic minorities, the Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge-Skills Survey (MAKSS; D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991). Interrater agreement ranged from $\alpha = .64$ to $.82$ across the scenarios at the second administration, and test-retest reliability was satisfactory ($r = .65$, $p < .001$).

The REST was not significantly related to the MAKSS; however, a later administration of the REST-CD found that it correlated moderately ($r = .59$, $p < .001$) with a measure of racial and gender bias (Quick Discrimination Index [QDI]; Ponterotto, 1995; Sirin et al., 2003). This result indicated that an individual's sensitivity toward ethical issues was related to one's attitude towards racial and gender equality. In addition, those who had taken a multicultural issues and ethics course were more likely to be racially sensitive. There was a 76.6% interrater agreement for the REST-CD, and interitem reliability was $\alpha = .82$.

Based on the results of previous studies conducted to validate the REST -CD (Brabeck et al., 2000; Sirin et al., 2003), I selected three scenarios with strong psychometric properties for this study: Faculty Lounge, Math Class, and Conference Room.

Faculty Lounge. Two counselors are discussing a student in front of a new faculty member. The two veteran counselors discuss the student's academic and private life in stereotypical and derogatory ways. They show no concern for her privacy and a complete disregard for her rights to confidentiality. In addition, it is clear that they have

no understanding of her culture. When the new faculty member tries to share her thoughts and stand up for the student, she is met with hostility and ridicule.

Math Class. A teacher who usually teaches honors math is asked to teach a basic math skills class. A second teacher is observing the class. Throughout the class, the math teacher demonstrates his cultural ignorance and his incompetence in teaching a math class of this level. He makes stereotypical remarks and in his attempt to connect with his students, allows racial and gender bias to affect his interaction with his students. He never considers that his teaching style might be the reason why his students are not engaged in the process of learning in the classroom.

Conference Room. A meeting is being held in a conference room. A European-American girl stands up and complains that the Latina girls speak Spanish in front of the rest of them, and she thinks that this should not be allowed. The European-American counselor allows an unproductive fight to grow between the Spanish-speaking girls and the English-speaking girls. When the Latina girls assert that they have the right to speak their language, they are told that the school has a policy against speaking foreign languages when others are excluded. The European-American counselor defends the school rule without considering the inherent racial discrimination. When a Latina faculty member tries to defend the Spanish-speaking girls, she is not listened to, and is treated rudely.

The scoring system (Brabeck et al., 2000) assesses the ability of school-based professionals to recognize the relevant ethical issues identified from professional codes of ethics. These include counseling, social work, nursing, and teaching. Brabeck et al. provide a complete description of the REST stimulus material and system for scoring

ethical sensitivity. The Faculty Lounge scenario depicts eight instances of ethical violations, the Math Class scenario depicts six instances of ethical violations, and the Conference Room depicts nine instances of ethical violations. The REST-CD version used in this study consisted of a total of 23 ethical issues that participants were asked to identify. Three trained raters (the researcher and two graduate students) rated responses to each scenario separately. Raters were also blind to participants' identity or characteristics. After the initial scoring, raters discussed any discrepancies between the ratings and, by consensus, determined a final score for each of the 23 issues.

Bebeau and Rest (1982) previously developed methods of scoring ethical sensitivity, and these methods were used in this study. If a participant does not identify the issue at all, he or she receives a score of 1 for that issue. A score of 2 indicates that the participant has identified the unethical behavior. A score of 3 indicates that the participant recognizes the unethical behavior and is able to elaborate on the implications of the behavior by demonstrating that he or she understands these issues within the context of the situation depicted in the scenario (Sirin et al., 2003). Thus, the range of possible scores was from 23 (identified no issues) to 69 (scored 3 on all issues). The scores for each scenario were calculated by adding the scores for each issue and dividing by the total number of issues; thus the REST-CD total score was computed by taking the average of the scenario scores.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from three local universities to voluntarily participate in an interactive study to assess a measure of professional ethics. From the original pool of 61 volunteers, 54 actually completed the protocol. Participants were informed at

the time of recruitment that one participant would be randomly selected to receive a \$100 Gift Card. All participants were in the first semester of their two-semester internship and were invited to a lab where they were given instructions about how to use the REST-CD version on a Windows-based personal computer. They received headphones, CD-ROMS which included the three scenarios described earlier (see Table 1 for sample interview questions), and a flash drive for recording their responses.

Table 1*Interview Protocol Used in the Math Class Scenario*

1. Imagine you are Ms. Marisa Cruz, the teacher observing Mr. Ross, in the scene you just saw, what would your response be to Mr. Ross be?
 2. What factors impact your response to him?
 3. Why are these factors important?
 4. How do you think Mr. Ross would interpret and react to what you said?
 5. What about the students? How would he respond to what you said?
 6. What is your reaction to the entire classroom scene you just witnessed?
 7. What in the scene influenced your reaction?
 8. What do you think are the issues raised during this scene?
 9. Can you expand on why you consider these issues important?
 10. Are there any other issues?
 11. How do you think these issues affect the way these students learn the material presented in the classroom?
 12. What arguments might be offered against the position you have taken?
 13. Is there anything else you would like to say or comment on?
 14. Thank you!
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Participants signed an informed consent statement and then completed a demographic questionnaire and a multicultural experience questionnaire. Following this, participants immediately took the REST-CD. The demographic questionnaire included information about the participant's age, gender, racial/ethnic background, and income and education levels. The multicultural experience questionnaire included open-ended questions about experiences that participants may have had with multicultural issues, including having completed a course on multicultural issues, a course on ethical issues, and a course with a focus on either multicultural, ethical issues, or both. Each session took about 90 minutes, and participants were debriefed afterwards.

Results

Internal consistency Cronbach's alphas were calculated for each scenario and for the full scale score. The alpha coefficient was .72 for Faculty Lounge, .68 for Math Class, and .71 for Conference Room. Correlations among the three scenarios are presented in Table 2. The results show that the three scenarios were significantly correlated with one another and correlation coefficients were in the range of .44 to .56. The Cronbach's alpha for the REST-CD total, with 23 items, was .85. To assess the reliability of the scoring protocol, the percentage of perfect agreement between the three raters was calculated for each scenario separately. The percentage agreement levels before scores were resolved for analysis were 76.5% for Faculty Lounge, 73.5% for Math Class, and 74.6% for Conference Room. The percentage agreement level for the total REST-CD score was 76.52% and, after disagreements were resolved, it was 100% for each of the three scenarios.

Table 2*Intercorrelations between the Study Scenarios and REST-CD Total Score*

	Faculty Lounge	Math Class	Conference Room	REST-CD
Faculty Lounge	1			
Math Class	.44**	1		
Conference Room	.46**	.53**	1	
REST-CD Total	.79**	.74**	.84**	1

Note. **p < .001

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the impact of course experience on individuals' ability to recognize racial and gender intolerance. The independent variable, prior course experience in multicultural/ethical issues, included three groups of students: those who had taken one course related to multicultural/ethical issues, those who had taken two or more courses, and those who had not taken any. The *One-course* group included those who had taken one course on either multicultural issues or ethical issues ($N = 26$). The *Two-course* group included those who had taken both multicultural issues and ethical issues courses ($N = 16$). The *No-course* group included those who had not taken any courses in either one of the two areas ($N = 12$). The dependent variable was the total REST-CD score. Since the group sizes were unequal, I conducted a Levene's test of homogeneity of variance, which was not significant. Therefore, the group variances were not significantly different from one another.

The results of the ANOVA showed a significant difference between the groups, $F(2, 53) = 5.46, p < .001$. Further analysis using Scheffe's post hoc test indicated that participants in the two-course group scored significantly higher than participants in the no-course group ($M = 15.33$ vs. $M = 11.41, T = 3.32, p < .001$). The difference between the no-course group and the one-course group was in the expected direction but was not significant (11.41 vs. $12.54, T = 1.22, ns$). The results of these tests, as well as the means and standard deviations for the three groups, are reported in Table 3.

Table 3

Differences Among Course Groups on REST-CD Total Scores

Course Experience	M	SD	No-Course	One-Course
No course	11.41	1.42		
One course	12.54	1.35	NS	
Two courses	15.53	1.98	$p < .001^*$	NS

*Level of significance using Sheffe's post hoc test procedure.

Discussion

The results of this study will provide counselor educators and others with a reliable and cost-effective way to measure ethical sensitivity to racial and gender intolerance in schools. The REST-CD appears to be a valid measure of sensitivity to racial and gender intolerance, and the results of this study provide further support for this claim. Researchers have a long history of attempting to measure Rest's four component model, but have been limited by cost and time constraints (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). This study attempted to address these limitations by

measuring a respondent's ability to produce an ethically defensible response, while reducing the prohibitive cost of live interviews.

This study also demonstrates that ethical sensitivity towards issues of racial and gender intolerance is related to coursework in professional ethics and multicultural issues. It also adds to the literature that demonstrates that courses in professional ethics promote ethical sensitivity (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). In this study, courses in both professional ethics and multicultural issues were significantly related to REST-CD scores. This study replicates the findings of Sirin et al. (2003), who argued that “the behavior of professionals, particularly in relation to multicultural issues, is separated from a concern for developing ‘good people,’ which is an ambiguous concept, and instead attaches it to the concrete requirements of professional ethical codes” (p. 232).

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2004) Ethical Standards, the professional school counselor “expands and develops awareness of his/her own attitudes and beliefs affecting cultural values and biases and strives to attain cultural competence” (E.2.b.). Since acquiring cultural competence is an aspirational requirement for ethical practice, counselor interns should be able to recognize many of the issues raised by the REST-CD; not doing so means not living up to one's professional duty. Results from this study demonstrate that counselor interns have some distance to go before reaching this goal. Implications for counselor educators and internship supervisors seem clear: more specific attention to ethical issues is warranted. One suggestion is to use the REST-CD during internship to prompt discussion of the necessity of understanding and implementing professional ethics codes in practice.

Several limitations are inherent in this study. Most importantly, the number of participants ($N=54$) is relatively small, and the time required to administer and score the REST-CD scenarios is somewhat daunting. Future researchers might consider placing the materials on the Web, so that more people could have access to them. Another limitation of this study is the fact that the REST-CD is a relatively new instrument, and additional empirical studies are needed to validate it further. Also, one of the universities is not CACREP-accredited; therefore it is possible that this is a confounding variable. In other words, it could be the program status (CACREP vs. non-CACREP) versus the number of multicultural or ethical courses that makes the difference. Finally, in order to delimit the parameters of this study, the only scholarly journal utilized in the database search was *Professional School Counseling*. Future researchers may want to expand their literature search to include other publication outlets.

Future researchers could examine the development of ethical sensitivity in counselor interns by measuring participants at the beginning and at the end of their internships. Another possible research study could track counselor interns and then re-administer the REST-CD to participants after one year as professional school counselors. Finally, as a training tool, the scenarios could be used in universities, as well as in schools with practicing counselors, to promote discussions around violations of ethical codes and their implications for practice.

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Biographical Statement

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