

## Use of Critical Consciousness Theory to Explore Counselor Effectiveness During Disaster Response

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Building upon the foundation of global collaboration and scholarship that was laid two years ago, I was able to revisit schools and agencies in South Africa and Botswana. My research project focused on culture-centered disaster counseling and explored the impact of an international immersion experience on counselor competence.

The four week clinical outreach began with an international conference at the University of Botswana (UB) in Gaborone, where mental health stakeholders shared their perspectives on “Providing Culturally Competent Counseling Services in Trauma-affected Communities.” Approximately, 75 graduate counseling students, faculty, and counseling practitioners were in attendance. Throughout the conference, the UB students shared their struggles in counselor development, giving meaning to the words “cultural discontinuity.” Most narratives focused on how difficult it is for counselors to connect with their clients who often didn’t return. However, in general, their training was very similar to that in the U.S. Of significance, one of our team members remarked, “There should be a Botswana theory of counseling instead of only importing Western theories that don’t fit the culture.”

A nationally representative team of ten professional counselors and counselor educators were invited to participate the outreach experience. To more fully understand the southern African cultural contexts and the nature of HIV-AIDS related trauma, the clinical outreach team immersed themselves in the local milieu through both planned excursions to Robben Island, Soweto, and other landmarks, and by invited outings, like visiting the village of Molepolole with



teachers met at the conference. The immersion began at the Lesedi Village where the team experienced the history of South Africa through music, dance, and storytelling.

The bulk of the experience focused on connecting to individuals and community agencies through client-centered, community-based counseling, responding adaptively where and when needs arose. One agency was ready with a case presentation and manuscript they had written and requested consultation and supervision. Another agency that was visited, Sithandi Zingane, (translated as “We love the children”) provides care and support for orphaned children. While the clinical team brought considerable breadth and depth of counseling experience to the sites visited in South Africa and Botswana, an equally important emphasis was placed on their own growth, both personal and professional.

Preliminary analysis of the data suggests that the participants’ articulate increased cultural competence, critical thinking around sociopolitical context, and enhanced self-awareness related to personal bias. Early outcomes of the study have been disseminated at conferences and invited lectures in Romania, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and China. One paper is currently under review with a international peer-reviewed journal, other manuscripts are in progress. A FEO application has been submitted to the university to dedicate time to writing a textbook that articulates an emergent model of culture-centered disaster counseling that is built upon my outreach efforts in southern Africa and elsewhere.

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