The Emergence of Conflict in a Multicultural Training Group: The Anatomy of a Disorienting Dilemma

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Abstract

Bourjolly, Sands, Finley, and Arnold examine conflict in a multicultural training group for mental health practitioners. They used qualitative research methods to track the process as it unfolded. In this paper, they describe a critical case that elicited conflict and use transformative learning theory and postmodernism as lenses for understanding the event. A succession of comments perceived as insults or microaggressions served as predecessors to a disorienting dilemma that sparked strong emotional reactions and set the group on a course of transformative learning. They also discuss problematic cross-cultural communication styles and group dynamics related to the microaggression and describe the instructors' reflections. The paper concludes with implications for dealing with the emergence of conflict related to microaggressions in the classroom and the challenges of intense affect in relation to race, gender, and class. Although our critical case took place in a continuing education training class in multicultural practice, situations like this also occur in university courses and other educational settings.

Keywords: conflict, multicultural training, microaggression, transformative learning, postmodernism

> *I believe that our class (training) has struggled/is struggling with the same issues that have separated cultures throughout history. I wonder if this struggle will ever truly lead to a society…or world that celebrates and accepts our differences and similarities. (A participant)*

Conflict is an inevitable development of groups (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). When conflict arises in multicultural training classes, deeply embedded cultural worldviews may surface and influence perceptions of the conflict and appropriate solutions (Paletz, Miron-Spektor & Lin, 2014). Conflict is to be expected when there is an emphasis on experiential learning, process, intergroup dialogue, and emotional openness (Sevig & Etzkorn, 2001). Yet conflict can be a catalyst for growth and transformative learning (cf. Jehangir, 2012). Through a critical case study

(Patton, 2002), we look at the emergence of conflict and reflect on its impact on intergroup interactions and the instructors. We identify and discuss predecessors to the conflict and the emotions that were aroused and the potential of the conflict to contribute to the transformation of worldviews. For the purposes of this paper, we define transformative learning as changes in worldview that are measured by changes in awareness, knowledge, skills, and intercultural sensitivity, application, and integration. The case study approach allowed us to examine the context of the multicultural training group and intergroup dynamics that served as triggers in creating conflict. It enabled us to take an in-depth look at how conflict and its triggers can precede a disorienting dilemma and play a role in fostering perspective change.

Our analysis of the case was informed by postmodern and transformative learning theories. Postmodern theory provides a framework for understanding how meaning is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/1991; Gergen, 2001) based on worldviews which are influenced by such factors as cultural background, racial identity, education, sex, gender, religion and positions of power. Differences in interpreting meaning can result in inadvertent insults (microaggressions, Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010) and conflict. Transformative learning theory can help us understand how these differences in perspective can give rise to triggers to conflict and lead to a disorienting dilemma. Unlike other steps in the transformative learning process, that may need to be encouraged (Brock, 2010), conflict in multicultural groups is inevitable and can be opportunities for cultivating perspective shifts and fostering transformative change.

Snyder (2008) suggests that in order to capture transformative learning in groups researchers should focus on process, incorporate a longitudinal design, and use multiple sources of data and field observations in their methods. Furthermore, she recommends close analysis of participants' communication to document the validity of the process. In keeping with Snyder's recommendations, we draw from multiple data sources, used multiple methods of data gathering, and describe in detail the event and interpersonal group processes as the event unfolded. Our paper is also in accordance with Brock's (2010) recommendation that 21st century research focus on transformative learning among different types of students and population groups. In this paper, we look closely at how mental health practitioners confront the different worldviews among themselves as an experiential model for building skills in facing and walking through conflict that may arise in work with people from diverse groups. Transformative learning and postmodern theories are used to analyze a critical moment that illuminates Intra/inter/group processes that functioned as a catalyst and turning point for participants and the entire group. In focusing on a critical moment within a multicultural training group, we aim to contribute to further understanding of the early stages of perspective change within transformative learning theory toward advancing more inclusive multicultural practice.

Background Literature and Theories

Conflict. Intercultural conflict can arise when there are misunderstandings, judgments, and misinterpretations due to differences in worldviews (Fisher-Yoshida, 2005; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). The conflict examined in this paper involves fundamental differences in worldview that can contribute to subtle, unconscious, often inadvertent interactions, referred to as racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007; Sue 2010). "Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or

unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Although our critical case study deals primarily with race, it stirred up feelings about biases based on gender and social class, which can also provoke conflict in multicultural training groups. People have "powerful reactions (cognitive, behavioral, and emotional) to the difficult dialogues once the microaggressions occurred" (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009, p. 18). In educational settings microaggressions can impede the learning process (Sue et al., 2009).

Using a classroom experience, Collins and Pieterse (2007) identify intellectual *and affective* responses commonly associated with racial interactions, such as a need to appear multiculturally aware, denial, the experience of being silenced, awkwardness, and uncertainty. Khuri (2004) suggests a need for more deliberate consideration of affective processes throughout all stages of a group so that instructors will not be caught off guard by classroom eruptions of heightened affect, lack of affect, or various types of affective responses. Several writers criticize multicultural training for emphasizing cognitive processes while neglecting the experiential and emotional responses which are crucial to becoming more multiculturally competent or inclusive (Champe & Rubel, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Jackson, 1999).

Conflict in Multicultural Education and Training. There is a paucity of theoretical literature and systematic research on the occurrence, types and patterns of conflict, or underlying issues that contribute to difficult interpersonal issues or "flashpoints" in multicultural training and education (Garcia, Hoelscher, & Farmer, 2005), but there are descriptive and analytical writings. Khuri (2004) examines the complex dynamics inherent in intergroup dialogue among people who are engaged in structured, sustained, face-to-face conversation among both dominant and subordinate social identity groups. Jackson (1999) describes types of behavioral resistances and classroom coping strategies that students, including those of color, can exhibit as they manage their emotional reactions in multicultural training. Avoidance, negative transference reactions, resistance to course content and silence are behavioral examples. Identity development issues within ethnic groups or between groups may also make students feel uncomfortable. This discomfort could be a consequence of perceived or real racial assaults, that is, microaggressions.

Fisher-Yoshida (2005) suggests that conflict is compounded when cultural characteristics are considered and recommends the transformative learning framework as a means to attain a deeper understanding of what the conflict is about, fundamental belief systems that are involved, and increased awareness of oneself, others, and the situation. She also discusses postmodernism as a paradigm for understanding conflict and the role of communication in the emergence and resolution of conflict. In this paper, we draw from transformative learning theory and postmodernism to analyze the conflict, and we discuss the importance of communication styles.

Communication styles are patterns of verbal and nonverbal expression and interpretation (Kochman, 1981) that are culturally experienced and learned in childhood long before cognitive processes are fully developed. They draw from complex rules shaped by cultures, education, and personality. Cultural variations occur both within and between groups along several dimensions, such as directness-indirectness and gestures (Park et al., 2012). Paralinguistic and related features may also vary, such as voice tone and volume, eye-contact, pauses, silences, conversational conventions, and emphasis on certain words or parts of the sentence (Sue & Sue, 2013). Low context cultures, such as educated European Americans, rely principally on words. Ideas are typically presented objectively and rationally, devoid of emotion, as emotionality may

be viewed as a prelude to anger, hostility, and lack of control (Kochman, 1981). High-context cultures, such as Latinos and African Americans, are more attuned to the social context in which the words are spoken (Hall, 1976/1989). For African Americans, the expression of powerful emotions conveys advocacy, passion, conviction and honesty (Kochman, 1981). Communication styles are frequently misunderstood and can negatively impact group discourse (Sevig & Etzkorn, 2001).

Transformative Learning Theory . Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991) offers concepts for understanding different perspectives experienced in a conflict situation. Mezirow (1978; 1991) and Mezirow and Associates (2000) refer to conflict as a critical period of crisis in which individuals find themselves in a dilemma without the knowledge, perspectives, or skills to either understand or resolve it. Long-standing perspectives, feelings, assumptions, and beliefs are surfaced and explored, and their validity is questioned. Managing the personal crisis in encountering conflicting worldviews can be uncomfortable, contributing to a disorienting dilemma that can be profoundly emotional. Critical self-examination or reflection on the disorienting dilemma, sharing one's transformative process with others, as well as the acquisition of knowledge and skills, are several of the steps Mezirow (1978) describes as helping to enlarge or create new frames of reference. Transformative learning can occur over time, in epochal moments, or both, which should be taken into account in curriculum development (Mezirow, 1985).

A central theme of transformative learning theory is perspective transformation, in which a person's fundamental beliefs, assumptions and feelings, that is, worldview, are surfaced and reflected upon as targets for change. Understanding the dilemma, resolving it, and integrating it into one's personal schema are also major steps in transformative learning. Transformative learning theory, when applied to multicultural training, can move participants beyond first order change that is, knowledge enhancement, to second order change, which is a transformation in worldview (Pernell-Arnold, Finley, Sands, & Bourjolly, 2012).

Brookfield (1987) documents five phases of critical thinking that is typical of a transformative experience that links critical thinking and critical reflection. In the first phase, an event acts as a trigger and causes discomfort. This is followed by (2) appraisal of the situation, (3) exploring new ways of understanding meaning, (4) developing alternative interventions that can impact the transformative experience to promote critical thinking and reflection, and (5) beginning to integrate new perspectives into one's life. The latter stage involves engaging in a process of reconciling conflicting feelings, cognitions, and attitudes. In this paper we focus on Brookfield's first phase, the trigger that set off the conflict, and touch on the second phase.

Postmodernism . Postmodernism is an intellectual movement that has influenced architecture, the humanities, the social sciences, and the applied professions. It challenges assumptions about the nature of knowledge that have been taken for granted in Western societies since the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, which arose in Europe in the 18th century, marks the beginning of "modernism," which is predicated on rationality, objectivity, truth, the separateness of the individual mind, and scientific reasoning about cause-effect relations (Gergen, 2001). A further modernist belief is that language represents the world as it actually is (Gergen, 2001). Postmodernism challenges modernist assumptions that knowledge is certain and that what is taken as reality is the only reality. It directs attention to how language, which is used to describe reality, is embedded in culture. Culturally defined realities are experienced as "the" reality,

making it difficult to "stand outside one's traditions and still communicate effectively" (Gergen, 2001, p. 807). Yet reality is not fixed but rather it is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/1991), related to the historical and social context, and fluid (Weeden, 1987). Because of the instability of what is perceived to be real and varying cultural experiences and definitions, the same event can be interpreted differently by persons of different cultures.

Postmodernism questions universal explanations, including scientific ones, and recognizes that events can unfold in nonlinear, complex ways. As indicated, the social context, particularly the local or immediate situation, informs meaning (Gergen, 2001). Furthermore, cultural groups are considered multifaceted and varied. Individuals within cultural groups vary as well. An additional characteristic of postmodernism and the related movement, poststructuralism, is that there is a relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1980) where dominant discourses, such as beliefs about the superiority or inferiority of particular races, genders, and social classes, can overshadow other coexisting discourses (Foucault, 1978). Through the method of deconstruction (Derrida, 1976), one can uncover "subjugated knowledge" (Foucault, 1972, 1980) and meanings and reveal the ideological underpinnings of what is assumed to be established knowledge.

Multicultural training groups tend to include individuals from diverse cultures who participate in particular ethnic subcultures and a wider culture. Their different constructions of reality can lead to misunderstandings. At times, dominant discourses and those held by nondominant groups clash and emerge as conflict. In this paper we attempt to understand and uncover the discourses involved in the conflict described in this paper.

Methods

This is an analytic paper that used the case study method and qualitative data from our evaluation study of PRIME, a multicultural training program. We used transformative learning theory and postmodernism to analyze the case and interpret its meaning.

The PRIME Training Program

This paper is one of a series of papers generated by the quantitative and qualitative evaluation of Partners Reaching to Improve Multicultural Effectiveness (PRIME), a 3-year, Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Workforce Training Grant to Reduce Ethnic and Racial Disparities 2002-2005. PRIME was a continuing education training program that was sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, and the Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse. The training was designed as a comprehensive, standardized, multicultural adult education program specifically targeted toward agency teams of experienced practitioners and peer mental health providers who were working with persons with severe and persistent mental illnesses.

Intra- and interpersonal processes were central to the achievement of learning objectives and program outcomes. A variety of didactic and experiential instructional processes were employed such as exercises, self-reflective journals or logs, participant-devised service enactments as well as the integration and application of new perspectives in the implementation of agency field projects (Brock, 2010; Ridley, Mendoza, & Kanitz,1994). The "living" curriculum was modified in successive sessions to accommodate participants as worldviews were challenged and in flux.

PRIME training was conducted over a period of 10 months, separated by a summer break, with classes meeting two consecutive days each month. The curriculum was structured around developmental and sequential phases to promote critical transitions or turning points, beginning with self-awareness and learning about other cultures; moving toward awareness of discrimination and skill attainment, application and integration.

Consistent with Sue and Sue (2003), we viewed a culturally competent provider as one who: 1) actively engages in the process of becoming aware of personal assumptions about human behavior, values, preconceived notions, and personal limitations; 2) attempts to understand the worldview of one who is culturally different; and 3) actively engages in developing and practicing culturally relevant intervention strategies. We expanded the definition of culture to include class, age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, within group differences, socio-political history, privilege, and intergroup dynamics (Carter & Qureshi, 1995).

Evaluation of the PRIME Training Program

The evaluation of PRIME was multi-faceted, with quantitative and qualitative components. Instruments and informed consent procedures were approved by the institutional review board of one of our universities. The quantitative component entailed the completion of several standardized quantitative instruments during the first and final sessions. (For a description of the instruments that were used in the quantitative analysis, see Stanhope, Solomon, Pernell-Arnold, Sands, & Bourjolly, (2005). When we used these instruments to evaluate four cohorts of PRIME trainees, 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2007 (PRIME, 2006, 2008), we found significantly positive changes in awareness, knowledge, and skills for all cohorts. (The fourth cohort was sponsored by a local government.) We view these changes in awareness, knowledge, and skills as quantitative indicators of transformative learning.

The qualitative component of the evaluation research, of which this paper is a part, focused on process and consisted of several activities. Most relevant to this paper is participant observation by two university-based researchers (two of the authors), who sat in on training sessions together during most of the first year and at separate times during the next two years. Participant observation is a method associated with ethnographic research in which the observer becomes immersed in a setting so as to gain access to an insider perspective at the same time one is an outsider (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The participant observers took process notes on their observations, which included dialogue and comments on nonverbal interactions. They also noted events associated with heightened tension (critical incidents).

Another part of the qualitative evaluation pertinent to this paper involved reading and evaluating reflective logs written by participants and submitted at the next two-day session. In a qualitative analysis of the logs during the first cohort year (Bourjolly et al., 2005) and three subsequent iterations (Pernell-Arnold et al., 2012), we found increased cultural sensitivity by the end of each year, but nonlinear processes during the year. For these studies the authors used Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) to measure the change in worldview from ethnocentric to ethnorelative thinking (Bennett, 1986).

As indicated, our previous quantitative and qualitative evaluation studies found changes in awareness, knowledge and skills (PRIME, 2006, 2008) and worldview (Bourjolly et al., 2005; P, Pernell-Arnold et al., 2012), which are consistent with our definition of transformative learning as it applies to multicultural education. In order to better understand the process of change, we decided to hone in on a significant event that occurred during the first iteration of the training program. The

event referred to as "The Red Dress," represents an interruption of the training class' process that could be best understood through a close qualitative analysis. We used the case study method, described next.

Case Study Method

With case study research "the investigator explores a bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73, bold italics in original). Our case involved conflict within a multicultural training class. For the case study, we had data on its emergence and on its expression over time, which set boundaries on the case, and used multiple sources of data, participant observation notes, and logs. For this paper, we are focusing on the emergence of conflict, which preceded the disorienting dilemma. We consider the examination of emergence a "critical case study," defined as one "that can make a point quite dramatically" and make a statement "to the effect that 'if it happens there, it will happen anywhere'' (Patton, 2002, p. 236).

Participants in the Training Class

The first cohort of the PRIME training program consisted initially of 46 individuals. Of the 34 who participated in the program consistently, 72% were female and the average age was 46. Fifty-three percent were below the age of 45, and 47% were age 45 and older. Fifty-nine percent identified as European or American White, 13% defined themselves as American Black, and 16% said that they were multiracial. Large proportions reported their religion as Christian (75%) and their sexual orientation as heterosexual (94%). Thirty-eight percent completed college, with an additional 15% having completed some years of college. Forty-one percent had graduate degrees. Sixty-nine percent of the training participants, all mental health providers, had some prior multicultural competency training.

Analysis of "The Red Dress" Incident

The evaluators observed several incidents of heightened emotion over a period of three years. One of these ("The Red Dress") had to do with race, gender, and social class. The intensity of the affect, the heated discussion, and even the silences attested to the salience of this event. The instructors and evaluators, as well as staff members who were present during the event, confirmed that this was a significant incident. Participants provided further evidence of the salience of this event in their logs and in discussions at PRIME reunions six months after the conclusion of the first iteration and a year after that.

Our analysis of the incident was retrospective and multi-layered. We pulled together two data sources - the evaluators' field notes on all sessions and participants' logs. The data were reviewed by the two evaluators and two training instructors, who triangulated or cross-checked their observations as a means of establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From the data we created a chronology of events in each day of each two-day session (Creswell, 2007), identifying comments and interactions that were directly or indirectly related to "The Red Dress" and constructed a summary description over the entire training period (Creswell, 2007). Our retrospective analysis of the logs consisted of re-reading them to identify references to the event. We identified expressions such as "racial tension," "heated discussion," "clash," and "uproar"

and counted the number of references for each session. In addition, one of us developed a diagram that helped us understand the dynamics of the event.

The two evaluators wrote an initial description and analysis of the event and the first draft of this article. Recognizing that they needed the instructors' insider's perspective within a constructivist qualitative research framework (Charmaz, 2014), they asked the two instructors to work with them in revising the paper. Our writing team was multidisciplinary (counseling psychology and social work) and multicultural (African American, White Jewish, and Caribbean African American), enabling us to bring in multiple perspectives. In addition to our ability to engage in investigator, methodological, and data triangulation, we also used theoretical triangulation, comparing multiple perspectives (Denzin, 1989).

The Critical Case Study: The Red "Dress"

Context

The critical incident occurred late Friday of the second two-day training session. The topic of racial/cultural identity development was introduced in a short lecture. Five identity statuses were presented: conformity (going along with and preferring the norms of North American mainstream culture while lacking awareness and acknowledgement of one's own cultural identity); dissonance (budding awareness and questioning about one's racial/ cultural identity in conflict with previously held beliefs, attitudes and preferences for those of the mainstream); resistance-immersion (catapulted by a personal or societal event, such as one involving social injustice, a person becomes completely absorbed in one's own racial/cultural identity and projects anger towards those of the dominant North American culture); introspection (willing to look at oneself and become less polarized); and integration (the person has balanced perspectives towards self, others within the race/culture, and those in the mainstream) (Sue & Sue, 2013). Trainees were next asked to apply the statuses to themselves in relation to their workplaces and then to an actual case.

The key participants in the critical incident were: Marcia, an Italian-American, first-generation-educated, PhD psychologist and administrator who volunteered to offer a case example of an African-American female; Rita, a self-identified African American with an African-American father and a white mother, also a manager; and Irene, an administrator of Irish-American ancestry. The names of these participants were changed to protect their identities. Other class participants will be identified by their gender (M or F) and racial or ethnic background, that is, African American (AA); Chinese American (CA); white (W) and Latino/Latina American (LA). The dialogue was reconstructed from field notes taken during the event. We are calling this case "The Red Dress" because during the course of the dialogue, what was initially described as a "red jacket" became reframed as "the red dress."

The Critical Incident

Marcia: I have an example of an African-American client who comes to the clinic dressed stylishly in a red jacket. This client lives in poverty and is depressed. She is in the conformity status. (The room is noisy; people are raising their hands.)

Rita: For African Americans, dressing well is for *us*. You wear bright colors like red in order to feel good; it's not conformity and not to stand out.

Marcia: This client did not want to look like a mental health client. Looking stylish is not like others; she saw others as stuck in poverty.

Instructor 1: I have trouble seeing this woman in the conformity status. Others are conforming with their social class. This woman may want to get out of poverty, which is a strength.

Marcia: This woman could never get un-depressed.

Instructor 1: Why is this woman depressed? Did her race and class make her feel bad?

Marcia: This woman was trying to look like the dominant culture.

Instructor 1: Race and class seem to be involved. A lot of people love to dress well and are not necessarily conforming.

Marcia: The client dressed so well that she 'outclassed' me and the staff.

Rita (speaking directly to Marcia): When you said that she outclassed you and the staff, I wonder how poor African-American women are supposed to dress. I'm dressing up today out of respect for our leaders (who are African American). If this was a white conference, I would dress down; I would wear jeans. Whites dress down for conferences. (There was a lot of laughing and talking after this exchange.)

Instructor 2: What you just experienced was a cultural encounter. Misunderstandings occur because we don't understand each other's perspective. This training is about getting people to this intensity and getting the awareness to change one's perspective. We got it out in the open. This is the kind of thing we will be working on.

Instructor 1: We do not know enough about the client to determine whether she was in the conformity status. We do not have a clue what the client thinks. So far it doesn't feel like conformity. You can't go by the top layer. You need to get to a deeper level that is related to culture.

AAF trainee: We hit a hot spot.

WM: No one wants to be prejudiced.

Irene: I'm wearing jeans and a jeans jacket. This is in protest to my family where Barbie dolls were valued. Jeans have a different meaning to me. It is not disrespect; it is an expression of non-conformity. I was the oddball in my group. I wore glasses and hated Barbies.

Instructor 1: Your wearing what you want is related to your identity. In your gender role status you are resistant-emergent.

Rita: It has always been painful to me that I am not black enough for other Blacks. I can't be darker. (She is crying). Whites say I'm not white enough. That's why I jumped at Marcia over her description of the poor African-American woman.

Marcia (thanking Rita): I shared this case because for this client race was an issue. My experience is that Blacks take pride in dressing well. This woman dressed as if she was going to church. I was surprised at others' reactions. I was not oblivious of where she was coming from. I work hard to try to understand. (People were crying.)

Instructor 1: There is a lot of hurt in the room. I appreciate people's willingness to share. It takes courage to own and work through the tension.

AAF: A lot of people took risks. I feel good about what was expressed. It aroused some soul searching. I skipped over a part of the initial questionnaire where it asked for sexual orientation. I denied that I was a lesbian on the form. With respect to dress, I wear what I want.

Instructor 1: This dress issue is a metaphor for who we are. We are sharing more of our real identities. (A couple of WMs made comments indicating confusion.)

Immediate Aftermath

Following the conflict, trainees discussed "being uncomfortable and unsure about where they are headed, being emotional yet feeling free." Marcia felt singled out. A WM complimented instructors for their handling of the situation. Another spoke of being "uncomfortable and relieved." Someone else said "I want to explore myself more." An AAF said, "I need to give this experience further thought." Another AAF said, "I am grateful that this happened" and implored Marcia not to feel angry. A WM said, "I tend to avoid situations like this. I never thought of these things before." Instructor 1 identified his identity as a dissonance status: "You are at the dissonance stage and need time to process what happened." Rita, who initially confronted Marcia, said "I'm surprised at myself." (Her voice was cracking while she talked). A WF said "I feel more passionate about the process now; pushed to a new level." Others spoke of feeling excited and hopeful that there will be change and a deepening of awareness. Someone else felt confused. A CAF expressed thanks to others for sharing. She said that this touched her pain as a Chinese American; she has two sides of herself. Instructor 1 said, "I am sorry we do not have another day tomorrow to continue this." A LAF said, "I am sad that we are leaving. I feel honored to be part of the process." An AAM added, "I've dealt with race at college. I do not have much to say, but I'm excited to be here."

In logs turned in at the next training session, a third of the trainees referred to this incident. One participant wrote about "how emotional people got, including myself" after the last session and expressed apprehension about "feelings running amok." Others expressed anger, discomfort, numbness, and concern that Marcia was being attacked, and wondered if "to achieve the ability to understand a different worldview means you will step on landmines."

Theoretical Analysis

Transformative learning and postmodern theories help us to understand the dynamics that led to dramatic eruption of and processes surrounding "the red dress" conflict as well as guide thinking about interventions. Transformative learning theory helps one recognize how a critical incident can disrupt a group, challenge long-standing perceptions, and create openness to changes later in training, whereas postmodernism helps one unpack the complexity of the issues underlying the conflict.

With respect to transformative learning theory, "the red dress" became the metaphor for the critical event or disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991), almost derailing the group's process, triggering the conflict for both the group and the instructors (Brookfield, 1987). The dilemma emerged following a presentation about racial/cultural identity development statuses. Marcia, Rita, and Irene each voiced different perspectives that we later learned were built up over time from their upbringing and life experiences. These "meaning" perspectives had oriented their ways of thinking, acting and feeling, influencing their core assumptions. They expressed intense affect and displayed emotional sensitivity and vulnerability. The process of transforming one's perspectives can initially be discordant, distasteful and even threatening but discomfort can be essential in dealing with one's experiences (Mezirow, 1991). The dialogue explored competing interpretations of the incident with opportunities for participants to learn from one another, to critically reflect on or challenge their own or others' points of view. Through this process, the status quo was disrupted with emerging group dynamics that changed the class-group for the entire length of the training program. What initially began as a discourse between two or three primary participants gradually became a collective disorienting group experience (Johnston, 2011) and a turning point for the group, that allowed the participants to open up and release unexpressed fears (e.g., being perceived a racist) and emotions that often accompany transformative learning in multicultural groups.

Underlying concurrent perspectives about race, gender and class impacted the dilemma. Marcia was unaware of the personal meaning and impact of her own social group identities and the extent to which she had been able to integrate these identities. Given her educational and professional status, Marcia did not seem to have anticipated such strong reactions from her colleagues. She appeared shocked, exposed, alone, and vulnerable, having believed that she had "worked hard" to understand, suggesting that others were not recognizing her efforts. She may have had an unspoken fear of others perceiving her a racist. At a later point in the dialogue, this fear was verbalized by a white male who said, "No one wants to be perceived as prejudiced." Her next comment that her client "outclassed" both the therapist and other staff unintentionally impacted the African-American women, heightening tensions. Here Marcia appeared to assume that she already had a working knowledge of African-American dress codes. Other class members seemed to perceive that African-American women were unfairly attacking Marcia while making others "walk on eggshells." These long standing meaning perspectives, "habits of mind" (Mezirow, 1991), or stereotypes, often held by those in the dominant US culture, were also revealed in the classroom dialogue and in the logs (e.g., that African Americans are angry and verbally assaultive while those who are white are victims). Another unspoken stereotype was the perception that African-American expressive communication styles were threatening, resulting in fear and inhibition of effective communication (Kochman, 1981).

Marcia may have had a generalized overview of "surface" cultural issues but Rita questioned Marcia's perceptions and knowledge of African-American deep cultural beliefs and

values by asking for clarification. Marcia's statements may have reflected her perception of norms on how professionals, poor people, African Americans, and mental health clients should dress, conflating the multiple stereotypes. To her the client was over dressed. However, Rita, a person with lived experiences as an African American, was questioning Marcia's perspectives, knowledge, and awareness. It was apparent to the instructors that Marcia also lacked familiarity with deeper, historical, socio-cultural norms. It was during the discussion that Instructor 2 appraised the dilemma (Brookfield, 1987) reframing the conflict as a "cultural encounter."

Rita seemed to be keenly aware of the painful process of sorting out her identity. Rita's identity was shaped by having had to reconcile the meaning of belonging to two cultural communities, one African American, the other white, yet never quite fitting into either one. She identified as African American though still held painful memories and scars of growing up biracial and "not being Black enough." The description of the client in a red jacket triggered an emotional response in Rita. She initially seemed to perceive Marcia's description of the client as condescending and later reframed the client's "dress" as a sign of respect. Rita stated that she is "dressing up" as a sign of respect for the African-American instructors commenting, "Whites dress down for conferences." What was at first described as the "red jacket" by this time became referred to as "the red dress." This triggered an unexpressed reaction in both instructors. Each of them had experienced admonishments about Black women wearing red clothing which to them validated Rita's reaction. The discussion about "dress" triggered Irene's reaction against her family's expectation that women look like a Barbie doll. This fueled her choice to wear denim and no make up most of the time. She expressed anger and resentment against stereotypes. Like Rita, Irene had identity issues; Irene's were related to gender.

All three women's perspectives encompassed complex cognitive and emotional components that oriented their actions, thinking, and feelings. Such long-standing perspectives or "habits of mind" tend to be more durable, less accessible to awareness, and more difficult to change, if ever (Mezirow, 1978). "Points of view," however, tend to be more accessible, open to feedback and change (Mezirow, 1978).

When we use postmodern theory as a lens, we focus on the context, particularly the local context, in which meaning is constructed (Gergen, 2001). At the time the incident emerged, the trainees were sitting in six or eight round tables in a hotel meeting room in which the training took place. The two instructors were African-American women; the trainees were diverse with US and European whites comprising the majority. The occurrence of the event on a Friday afternoon likely put pressure on the group.

As with transformative learning theory, the cultural backgrounds of the key participants in the conflict are relevant from a postmodern perspective. All three had multiple identities in relation to race, ethnicity, and education, affecting the ways in which they experienced and interpreted others' cultures. For each of them, there was complexity within their differences. As we later learned, Marcia's high level of education did not enhance her standing in her family, which promoted traditional female gender roles. Even though Rita claimed expertise in African-American culture, her biracial identity was problematic to her. From a postmodern perspective, Rita's "race" is vague, lying between categories and encompassing both. Irene, like Marcia, grew up in a family that supported traditional gender roles; Marcia's Italian family emphasized cooking while Irene's was concerned with body image. All three women were administrators and clinicians. Marcia, who volunteered to describe the case, may have felt confident that her contribution would be supported.

A number of aspects of the case evoked problematic discourses, generating conflict in the group. Rita reacted to the insinuation that poor African-American women cannot dress well and used herself as an example of a Black woman who "dressed up" for training despite her observation that white women "dressed down" for conferences, wearing jeans. Besides suggesting that Marcia was "dressing down" and thus was not respectful of the African- American instructors, Rita drew attention to the racial identity of the two instructors with whom she allied herself. Rita's comments made visible the "subjugated knowledge" (Foucault, 1972, 1980) that there were racial differences within the group and between the instructors and the majority of the group; and that African Americans were being stereotyped as lower class. Marcia's presentation of her client as a person who not only conformed to whites' pattern of dressing well but exceeded it as compared with the staff antagonized Rita, who seemed to view Marcia as saying that the client should conform to what she considered the dress norms of the lower class.

The allusion to jeans as a way of dressing down served as a trigger to Irene who experienced gender conflict around dress in her upbringing. Speaking about her own attire of jeans and a jean jacket, she said that she chose her outfit as a form of rebellion against her family members' expectation that she conform to their ideas about the female gender role. In doing so, Irene added gender to the "subjugated knowledges" around race and social class that were part of the group's discourse (Foucault, 1972, 1980). Irene was also challenging the category "dress," indicating that style of dress has a different meaning to her than it has to others. This was, however, an inadvertent deconstructive move on Irene's part, disrupting others' understanding of this category and, by implication, other categories such as race, gender, and class (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). This had the potential of contributing to the participants' knowledge about diverse worldviews, so important in multicultural training, but it occurred too early in the group process for the participants to understand the multiple meanings of dress. The process of deconstruction destabilizes what we have come to take for granted (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 17).

Although one can identify triggers to the event based on what we know about the three individuals initially involved, one cannot attribute the reactions of the group to specific causes. The process was nonlinear, multicausal, and non-rational (Gergen, 2001), with individuals responding to the group's emotions as well as their own knowledge or lack of knowledge of people from diverse cultural groups. With participants coming from different perspectives, "one can scarcely stand outside one's traditions and communicate effectively" (Gergen, 2001, p. 807).

Postmodernism also highlights the role of language and how it constitutes reality (Gergen, 2001) as in the transformation of the "red jacket" into "red dress." Although Rita mentioned that African Americans like to wear bright colors like red because they make one feel good, no one addressed the broader implications of the color "red," a hot color, in this intense episode. Research conducted by Pazda, Prokop and Elliot (2014) shows that women wearing red are viewed as more sexually receptive than those wearing other colors. In addition, other females tend to derogate the sexual fidelity of women wearing red and distract their male partners from those in this color, as they are seen as sexual competitors. (The deep cultural meaning of the color red among African Americans will be discussed in a future paper). The incident around the red dress/jacket also stimulated war-related language in group discussions and in the written logs. The term "landmines" was used to depict the unpredictability of events that can turn out to be dangerous, and how vulnerable participants felt over being present during such an event. One of the trainees spoke of hitting a "hot spot." Participants also remarked in their logs that Marcia was being "attacked." One of the instructors reframed "hot spot" by introducing a more neutral term, "cultural

encounter." This grappling with language shows how the group was trying to define an incident that was inexplicable within their existing frameworks.

Discussion

This paper expands the authors (Bourjolly et al., 2005) previous findings that the pathways to intercultural sensitivity are nonlinear. The pathway can be marked by one or more salient, unscripted, conflictual events that disrupt the status quo and the group's learning process. The conflict described in this paper that initially occurred among several of the group members became a disorienting dilemma for the entire group, changing the trajectory of the group curriculum, becoming the major vehicle for affective learning and reflection throughout the remainder of the class cycle.

In the course of amalgamating our process notes and the logs and reviewing the literatures on transformative learning theory, postmodernism, and multicultural counseling psychology we became aware of a possible unrecognized link between Mezirow's (1978) ten precursor steps to transformative learning and the emerging literature of microaggressions (Sue, et al. 2007). In our critical case study, a sequence of unintended verbal and nonverbal communications perceived as insults or insensitivity by one or more class participants preceded the disorienting dilemma. Marcia's self-perceived "innocuous" statement about the attire and economic status of an African-American woman who was a therapy client was the initial microaggression that triggered "the red dress" conflict and also propelled the class into a process of transformative learning. The second microaggression came from Rita, an African-American class member who seemed to perceive the comment about the African American client as an insult. Her response, a statement about "dressing up and down" for the instructors seemed to further spark yet another perceived microaggression, expanding the discussion to encompass gender. Difference in Black and White communication styles (Kochman, 1981) may have also contributed to the microaggressions. When Marcia heard the tone, intensity, directness and emotionality embedded in Rita's questions, she may have made assumptions that Rita was angry and challenging Marcia's credibility. If this was Marcia's perception, this could be considered yet another microaggression. The discussion around "dressing down" may also have triggered Irene's painful memories of microaggressions around gender stereotypes on women's dress she experienced in her Irish-American family. Because she had never resolved these familial microaggressions, they remained current "hot buttons." The conflict among the three protagonists became what is described in postmodern literature as complex, ambiguous and non-rational (Gergen, 2001).

The presence of varied social identities, cultures, races, and worldviews in multicultural education and training classes naturally increases affective and cognitive demands in the learning environment. The environment is potentially fertile for the spontaneous occurrence of a disorienting dilemma that can be triggered by course content, readings, discussion, or video vignettes. Brock (2015) raises questions about how and where disorienting events may be inserted to increase the likelihood of transformative learning. The instructors in this multicultural educational training program do not actively promote disorienting dilemmas because embedded, unexpressed, not always conscious, racial-cultural worldview perspectives are already present in the diverse class group. They find that they may not be able to plan for the emergence of a disorienting dilemma.

What the authors most learned from this study is that there may be numerous unexplored

opportunities to bring to the surface and explore microaggressions that may or may not emerge to the status of a disorienting dilemma. Collins and Pieterse (2007) point out that naturally occurring, overt and less conspicuous, everyday events may prove to be quite effective learning experiences. They support a more direct, powerful, here-and-now engagement of issues as they occur in the daily milieu. In the 21st century, diversity issues or potential diversity conflicts can no longer be relegated only to multicultural, educational classes, employment settings, or certain levels of personnel (Collins & Pieterse, 2007; Sue et al, 2011). Verbal or nonverbal microaggressions, which are discernible whether or not they are intended, can be made explicit as "teachable moments" to be actively engaged and explored on both cognitive and affective levels, fostering transformative understanding and personal growth (Collins & Pieterese, 2007).

Impact on Instructors

In keeping with the emphasis on critical reflection in transformative learning theory (Taylor, 2008), the two instructors examined the dilemmas they faced throughout "the red dress" incident. Based on prior experience leading multicultural educational groups, they anticipated that conflict would arise at some time, but typically not so early in the training process prior to building group safety. "Forced" to respond in the "here-and-now," as in real life, they too were aware of the intense group emotions and were faced with personal and professional, as well as cognitive and affective dilemmas. They had to decide whether or not any of their experiences or points of view should be shared and, if so, when and to what extent. Marcia's misunderstanding of the content material contributed to the conflict, posing another dilemma of whether or not they should intervene with a cognitive intervention to clarify her misunderstanding of course content and possibly those of others. Concurrently, class participants seemed to be anxious to let their voices be heard even though the affect was intense. Finally, to what extent should they prioritize the safety of the group participants who were threatened by the suddenness of the conflict, cultural communication style differences, and conscious and unconscious emotions and defuse the emotional intensity? They could also collude with forces within the group to avoid conflict as does the larger society when affect appears "too hot" to handle. Concluding that ignoring the group's volatility would be detrimental, the instructors risked leaning into the conflict, initially supporting the conflicting points of view while also supporting the safety of the class group. The instructors intentionally withheld their own points of view at that particular time, using reflective listening skills to demonstrate empathy and acknowledge students' underlying emotions until their affect was fully expressed. It was only after this process that underlying assumptions could be addressed. The curriculum as planned was disrupted and the instructors experienced their own disorienting dilemma. Subsequently, the instructors held countless planning meetings to understand the meaning and import of the event and restructure the curriculum. Taylor (1998) suggests that when adhering to the practices of transformative pedagogy, there may be more time and work required to balance the demands of the curriculum, the students, and the institution.

Implications and Conclusions

The conflict over "the red dress" incident was rooted in differences of race, gender, and class. The conflict brought to the surface differences in cultural frames of reference and assumptions that could be examined through self-reflection. Postmodern and transformative

learning theories help to unravel the complexity of the disorienting dilemma and to deconstruct the racial-cultural realities and multiple layers of multicultural conflict that were not readily evident.

This paper reports on a single case study event, examining processes of an emerging disorienting dilemma, and may or may not be applicable to other educational or multicultural training events. This study may lay a foundation for future studies that may help to determine the extent that microaggressions might link to disorienting dilemmas and whether they are sufficiently valuable, in their own right, to contribute to the process of transformative learning. Franklin (1999) asserts that the less overt, daily encounters (e.g. microaggressions) are more beneficial to analysis and learning than the more blatant racial incidents.

In this particular case study analysis, the authors question whether or not the preceding microaggressions are actually the beginning components of the disorienting dilemma or whether the rapid sequencing of the microaggressions among different class members accelerated or exacerbated the dilemma. The authors also question whether or not the inception of this disorienting dilemma came much earlier in the process than they thought and had been building up over time (Mezirow, 1985) because of participants' initial conscious/unconscious, unexpressed fears that racial/cultural feelings might "run amok" and that they might be perceived as culturally or racially insensitive.

Deeply embedded emotions can be involved in both transformative learning and multicultural education and training. Dirkx (2006), for example, suggests that "coming to grips with racist or sexist assumptions we may be holding about our world may be associated with powerful feelings about ourselves or our past actions" (pp. 19-20). He refers to examples of these feelings as guilt, sense of loss, fear, shame, or general anxiety. Intra-interpersonal dissonance and conflict may result, both of which are inevitable and necessary conditions for transformative learning to occur (Saavedra, 1996; Taylor, 1998.). Conceptual work in multicultural education and training is in the beginning stages in shifting its focus from fixed-goal competencies to an acknowledgment of the importance of not only cognitive but the affective processes involved in personal growth and change (Buckley & Foldy, 2010). Transformative learning theory can further inform consideration of these proposed shifts.

Though affect as part of meaning making is central to the process of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991), Dirkx (2006) places an even greater emphasis on the symbolic, unconscious meaning of emotion. Emotionally-laden expressions, images evoked by affect and conflictual interpersonal interactions may be connected to unresolved conflicts, intrapsychic or interpersonal dilemmas. Rather than just being disruptive to the learning process, Dirkx (2006) suggests that the presence of overwhelming affect reveals the ways and forms through which learners give voice to unconscious personal meanings. Perceived differences in multiple realities can be observed. Group processes, imaginative activities or assignments broaden a leaner's conscious awareness by engaging, surfacing, and working with these realities, misunderstandings or misperceptions in meanings so critical to transformative learning.

The authors suggest that wherever there is diversity in an academic, community or institutional environment, the potential for microaggressions is also present. Collins and Pieterse (2007) recommend a systemic and comprehensive institutional approach to the vision and mission of social justice and transformative learning. Everyone is then expected to actively "notice" these critical events as a core mission of the organizational culture to be addressed. Administrative personnel, faculty, and student orientations can provide an overview of these types of conflicts

with ongoing opportunities for discourse, training, and mentoring provided for those with differing degrees of proficiency in identifying and addressing micro events when they occur. The challenges for both transformative learning and multicultural education and training will be how instructors negotiate between and across diverse cultures. Instructors' self-reflection, awareness of others and their different socio-cultural contexts contribute to greater authenticity as they engage the intellectual and emotional issues that are often minimized or avoided in the broader culture (Taylor, 2006). Noticing, analyzing, and intervening in situations in which microaggressions occur is authentic and may have a significant impact on student learning.

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