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Styles of Ethical Discourse in an Online Clinical Marriage and Family Therapy Course

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Abstract

There is a wealth of literature available on teaching ethics in a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom setting, but little research exists on teaching ethics in an online environment. Within the clinical communities, much of what has been written is focused on the need to avoid sexual relationships with clients. Literature on avoiding other types of potentially damaging multiple relationships is scant. This gap in the literature is interesting because results of research show that student-therapists report that there is a need for such training. This study began as an attempt to make a contribution to the literature and to learn what styles of discourse students in an online clinical training course employ to resolve a presented ethical dilemma. Results suggest that they used one or more of five discourse styles to resolve the dilemma: internal dialog, problem avoidance, rule following, public trust, and/or emotional focus. Based on these findings, recommendations for future researchers and online ethics course developers are presented.

Keywords: ethical discourse; online; marriage and family therapy; clinical training

Even a cursory look at the curricula of most graduate programs reveals an emphasis on ethics. Occasionally, it is embedded within the “foundations for graduate study” courses with a focus on topics, such as “academic integrity.” Other times, the emphasis on ethics is more explicit in course topics, such as “ethics in sports,” “ethics in business,” and “ethics and professional identity.” Focusing more narrowly, all of the professional associations in the behavioral health field have published codes of ethics. Further, they all make it clear that members should be well-trained in applying these codes to specific situations.
Historically, this training has taken place with the instructor and the student in the same physical space. However, with the rise of online education in more recent years, it is less common. According to the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) (Allen & Seaman, 2014), 7.1 million students are taking at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2014). This represents a growth in online education enrollment of 16.1% since 2002, the first year of the OLC study. The growth in physical classroom attendance was just 2.5% during the same period. Less than 10% of educational institutions do not offer online education; they are predominantly small baccalaureate institutions. With an increasing percentage of students receiving their training online, a question naturally arises regarding how they are making use of technology, how they perform the ethical discourse that has traditionally been associated with in-classroom ethics education, and to what degree, if at all, in-classroom techniques for learning and assessing ethical thinking apply to a digital classroom.

One answer to these questions is emerging in the field of marriage and family therapy (MFT). Online education in MFT has become a viable training option for many students. Currently, two online training programs are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Education (COAMFTE). Training therapists in an online learning environment is significantly different from training them in a traditional brick-and-mortar model in which students and faculty members share physical classroom space and engage in all of the interactions that are part of a land-based learning environment. Yet, a significant number of MFT students have selected online education programs, which must have ways to assess them for readiness to practice.

Assessing student-therapists’ abilities to interact ethically in clinical situations is important to both the professional development of the student and, more critically, the protection of clients. Assessing their abilities to recognize situations that may pose an ethical risk as well as to make ethical judgments is crucial to producing therapists who will “do no harm” to clients (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy [AAMFT], 2012, Principle I). In an online teaching/learning environment, it is important that these skills in applying ethical principles to clinical situations are taught well by faculty members who are not in the same location as the
students. It is also crucial in an online education environment that faculty members have a way to assess these skills among students. There have been few attempts to evaluate the ability to apply professional ethics in an online environment outside of the human services area (e.g., Shuman, Besterfield-Sacre, & McGourty, 2005). However, a review of the literature resulted in no scholarly endeavors focused on these issues in MFT, psychology, social work, or counseling in online education. It is somewhat surprising that much of the literature in the MFT field is focused on assessing and training students around not engaging in sexual relationships with clients. It would seem that a wider base of research would have been done on supervising students not to engage in other forms of inappropriate dual relationships with clients. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore how a group of students in an online graduate MFT program answered questions related to dual relationships on an assessment designed to gauge their readiness for ethical clinical practice.

MFT educators have an interest in assessing the readiness of students for clinical practice. Before students see their first client, many MFT programs have assessment measures in place to gauge their readiness to work in a clinical setting. One important area of assessment is student readiness to practice ethically. It is critically important in areas, such as establishing appropriate relationships with clients, and in assessing student abilities to distinguish among what is ethical, unethical, or questionably ethical.

The need to assess and train MFT students in this area is highlighted by Brock and Coufal (1994). They asked therapists eight questions focused on sexual attraction to clients. In addition, they assessed therapists’ perceptions of ethical issues related to sexual attraction in therapy. The focus on attraction is relevant. Whereas attraction is not itself ethically problematic, it can lead to a number of other ethical violations if it is not properly managed. Nickell, Hecker, Ray, and Bercik (1995) conducted a research project focusing on therapist attraction to clients in MFT. They found that the majority of practicing MFTs had experienced sexual attraction to clients. Further, a significant number of them had experienced sexual fantasies about clients. Nickell et al. also found that 55% of MFTs reported having very little or no training in handling sexual attraction to clients, with 47% reporting having no supervision in this area. They
recommended that MFT graduate programs include more intentional instruction to students about how to address sexual attraction in therapy. Again, the issue is handling sexual attraction, rather than simply prohibiting sex with a client (AAMFT, 2012, Principle 1.4).

Harris (2001) followed up on these studies from the 1990s. Harris (1995) previously focused on therapists-in-training who were in MFT master’s programs that were accredited by the COAMFTE. He noted that therapists-in-training still had questions about how to handle attraction in therapy, despite receiving close supervision. Harris (1995) asserted that these questions should be discussed openly, encouraging faculty members to educate therapists about attraction in therapy and promote ethical practices. In a follow-up study, Harris and Harriger (2009) asked students in COAMFTE-accredited programs about sexual attraction in conjoint therapy. Once again, they found that therapists-in-training were uncertain about how to discuss sexual attraction in therapy. Like Harris (1995), they advocated for the inclusion of open discussions of these matters as part of clinical training.

Whereas these earlier articles emphasized the experience of attraction in the therapy room, more recent articles prompted scholarly discourse related to uncertainty on the part of students in terms of how to address attraction to clients. Then, the conversation moved toward the need for COAMFTE-accredited graduate programs to include more intentional training of students about handling attraction. In subsequent studies, researchers found that students had questions about how to handle attraction in therapy, even though they were under supervision. As the conversation continued, there seemed to be a shift toward the graduate training program’s gatekeeping concerns when ethical issues emerged in the work of students, which will be addressed later in this paper. Along the way, instruments were developed and presented in the literature, which helped supervisors, clinical training directors, and program directors to capture the ethical practice development of therapists-in-training, along with measuring the development of skills in other areas.

A synthesis of these studies conducted between 1994 and 2009 addressed the need for MFT training to focus on ethical issues related to
sexual attraction. The need for additional training and opportunities for open conversations in training around this issue is a thread that runs across these studies. In addition, the focus of all of these articles surrounds sexual issues without a corresponding focus on other types of non-sexual dual relationships that might be problematic, such as forming social relationships with clients and coaching a client’s youth sport team. Another noticeable gap is that none of the studies reviewed focused on the online learning environment. Such an emphasis is important to begin to establish best practices for teaching and assessing ethics in this environment.

As previously stated, although assessing student readiness for ethical practice encompasses much more than just sexual attraction, the MFT literature seems to be focused on this area. Several instruments have been published that assess student development throughout clinical training, but they do not address student readiness to see their first clients. For example, Briggs, Fournier, and Hendrix (1999) developed the Family Therapy Skills List (FTSC) as a way of examining MFT trainees’ levels of competence in key areas of development, including appropriately using AAMFT ethical guidelines. Nelson and Johnson (1999) developed the Basic Skills Evaluation Device (BSED), which assesses the development of students’ clinical skills in a developmental way, categorizing students as beginners, intermediates, or advanced. However, neither the FTSC nor BSED offers a way of evaluating students on requisite skills, such as ethical practice knowledge and decision making, before they begin to practice.

An interesting focus in the literature is related to how both students and faculty respond to perceived competence issues in the clinical work of student therapists. Brown-Rice and Furr (2013) focused on how students in counseling programs that were accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) reacted to classmates who had problems with professional competency. They found that students were aware of classmates who might cheat on exams, engage in dual relationships, and engage in other unethical practices, such as lying to clients. Brown-Rice and Furr reported that students had concerns related to how faculty members and administrators did or did not deal with these noticeable issues with their peers.
Johnson et al. (2008) examined issues related to psychologists in training and supervisors' responses to perceived incompetence in supervisees. They noted that supervisors sometimes experience anxiety, ambiguity, and even confusion related to their role in responding to these competence issues with supervisees. In the MFT field, Sampson, Kelly-Trombley, Zubatsky, and Harris (2013) investigated the circumstances surrounding and offered guidelines for the dismissal of students from programs. These guidelines focused on ethics, the protection of the public, and an acknowledgement that remediation efforts do not consistently succeed.

Whereas student readiness for ethical clinical practice was examined at one point (i.e., before they see their first clients) in the present study, the literature reviewed above highlights the importance of being intentional throughout a training program to ensure that students are practicing competently and ethically. Part of this competence seems to entail the knowledge of ethical issues and principles as well as the ability to recognize issues that might involve an ethical dilemma or create a need for further assessment or consultation. The socialization of students to conceptualize cases in ethical ways begins early in training. Further, the assessment of these abilities before students enter practicum highlights the importance of ethical practice and decision making for them. Additionally, should a gatekeeping decision, such as those described in Sampson et al. (2013), need to be made, then these pre-practicum assessments may serve to build a context in which ethical decision making is expected, highlighted, and valued so that trainees will not be taken by surprise when the importance of ethical decision making in student practice is highlighted.

Method

To understand how online MFT students make ethical decisions and apply ethical principles to a clinical situation, essay responses of students who were pursuing a Master of Arts in MFT at an online university that is one of two COAMFTE-accredited programs that operates predominantly in an online environment were examined.

Participants

Prior to data collection, given that qualitative researchers frequently report sample sizes of between 5 and 15 (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), the authors chose to select 15 students' responses with the understanding that
additional essays might have to be examined if saturation was not reached. To understand the students’ discourse styles prior to their receiving feedback, the initial essay submissions of 15 students who eventually did satisfactorily complete the ethics essay requirement were selected. The sample came from identifying an arbitrary starting point in the database of more than 130 student responses, then selecting the first 15 students who successfully earned a passing grade on the essay. These 15 students ultimately comprised the final sample, as saturation was reached.

The original database of student essay responses contained some student demographic information. The sample consisted of 1 male and 14 females who ranged in age from 27 to 64 years (M=38, SD=11.2). Only 3 students were older than 45 years of age (48, 54, and 64). In addition, 4 students were 27 years old, and one was 28 years old. Thus, the sample was overwhelmingly comprised of young, female adults. All participants were residents of the United States. Although it was not necessarily representative of the general MFT student population, the sample was somewhat representative of the MFT program’s student body at the online university from which students were recruited.

Materials

The essay responses examined in this study were written to fulfill a requirement for admission to clinical training. Most COAMFTE-accredited programs have some similar screening process to ensure that students are able to apply ethical concepts before they actually start seeing clients. Prior to their admission to practicum, students at this online university must complete certain prerequisite courses, including a course in the AAMFT Code of Ethics. As one means of verifying that students are capable of applying their prior learning to actual clinical situations, during the pre-practicum process, students must provide a satisfactory response to a given ethical case scenario. The Director of Clinical Training assesses each student’s response according to a standard grading rubric developed by the clinical faculty, and provides detailed feedback to the student. If students do not meet the criteria listed in the rubric, they can rewrite their essays until they demonstrate the required levels of systemic and ethical thinking. There is no limit on the number of times that students may rewrite and resubmit essays.

The authors’ intention was to understand
the types of discourse that students were employing to resolve the ethical dilemma before feedback was provided. Therefore, only the first submission was examined in this study. For the purpose of this study, subsequent submissions that were shaped by the reviewer’s feedback were not included. The following is the scenario to which they responded:

In your personal life, you are in a committed relationship, yet you find yourself noticing that your client is quite attractive and having intimate thoughts about this particular client. To date you have been successful at pushing it away from your mind when you have the thought. One day your client discloses to you that s/he thinks about you a lot outside of sessions and wonders if the two of you may be able to start seeing each other socially.

This particular scenario is given to students because, according to Amanda Reeves, a staff attorney for AAMFT (personal communication, January 14, 2014), boundary violations, such as the one inherent in this case scenario (AAMFT, 2012, Principle 1.3 [prohibition against exploitive relationships]), have represented the second most common class of ethics violation over the past 10 years. The most common violation, professional misconduct (Principle 3.15), frequently also includes boundary violations and sexual misconduct. Clearly, as evidenced by the cases that have come before the AAMFT Ethics Committee, this is an important area for students to address.

In January 2015, AAMFT published a new Code of Ethics. Although there are some significant changes from the 2012 Code of Ethics, the specific principles (now called standards) used for this study’s analysis did not change. Furthermore, given that all of the essays were written to apply the 2012 AAMFT Code of Ethics, the authors decided to continue to reference only the 2012 AAMFT Code of Ethics in this study.

**Analysis**

The qualitative approach selected for this study was discourse analysis, specifically the historical discourse analysis grounded in a Foucauldian approach. This approach allowed for not only an investigation into what was said, but also an understanding of what was said in the broader social context in which the participants live. This desire to understand the larger sociocultural, sociolinguistic context fit well with the systems perspective about which the students were learning.

One of Foucault’s central concepts is how discourse shapes power in relationships (e.g.,
Foucault, 1980). Certainly, the power differential between therapist and client is a widely recognized and accepted ethical principle in therapy. This principle also influenced the choice of Foucault’s style of discourse analysis, as it was part of wanting to understand how students constructed “power” in their discourse. Likewise, the desire to understand how the broader social context shaped the students’ ethical discourse influenced the decision to look only at the pre-feedback essay responses. The goal was to investigate how the students understood the ethical dilemma as people who live in the wider sociolinguistic context who are “just now” being shaped in the professional context of MFT and who are beginning to engage in the “approved” discourse of the profession.

The key theoretical presupposition of discourse analysis is that mental realities are constructed linguistically and, therefore, come close to being “naturally occurring” (Perakyla & Ruusuvuori, 2011). Given that the grading rubric for the ethics essay specifies Principle 1.3 of the AAMFT Code of Ethics (multiple relationships, defined as relationships that have a potential to exploit the client and/or impair the therapist’s professional judgment) as a primary expected locus of analysis, the works of Foucault (1972, 1980) and Kendall and Wickham (1999) on discourse and knowledge proved to be particularly helpful as a lens of analysis. Specifically, there was an interest in how students’ discourse styles, as displayed in their essay responses, influenced the power balance inherent in the given scenario.

Personally identifiable data were removed from the essays before evaluation began to limit the influence of preconceived notions, positive or negative, about the student-author. This process was especially important because one of the researchers was a reviewer of the essays in his role as a clinical faculty member in the MFT program. Then, the essay responses were identified as belonging to Student 01, Student 02, and so on. Each researcher independently coded the entire set of 15 essays, but used different processes. One researcher manually coded the essays using a close-reading approach and memoing in Evernote, whereas the other one used NVivo. Findings were then discussed using WebEx. During this discussion, the discourse themes that were generated independently were identified.

Tentative consensus was reached in terms of language. Next, each researcher returned to the
data to determine if these tentative themes adequately accounted for the data. This cycle was repeated two more times until it was determined that the jointly identified themes accounted for all of the data. Having two researchers working on the total dataset independently using two different methods of analysis and reaching consensus each step of the way helped to promote the trustworthiness of the findings.

**Results**

Before proceeding to a more detailed analysis, a few general observations seem appropriate. First, each student response was framed in heterosexual terms. For a few of them, it was only implied. However, for the vast majority of students, it was explicit, even though the scenario did not reference the sex of either the therapist or the client. The scenario could have as easily been read with both therapist and the client being the same sex or different sexes, but none of the students chose to frame it in other than heterosexual terms.

The second general finding is that many of the students appeared to equate “intimacy” with sex. In the scenario, the therapist was having “intimate thoughts” about the client, who desired a social relationship outside of therapy. Nothing was written about either person’s having sexual thoughts. Yet, many of the students began their analysis of the dilemma by referencing Principle 1.4 (prohibition against sex with one’s client) as their starting point. In addition, many of them added Principle 1.5 (prohibition against having sex with relatives of the client) as more support for their position (AAMFT, 2012). Because nothing is explicitly stated about a sexual relationship in the scenario, it seems reasonable to conclude that students are bringing into their ethical discourse factors that are not actually present in the scenario.

**Discourse Styles**

**Internal dialogue.** The first discourse style discovered was an internal dialogue. It appeared in every essay response, except for those of Students 07, 08, and 11. For example, Student 01 wrote, “The decisions that I make on a day to day basis are rooted in the ethical principles I have chosen to govern my life.” The student went on to write, “I feel that I should not only attempt to be strong in my ethical underpinnings, but also understand and allow room for [my personal] growth and flexibility.” Student 03 cited two sources to support the contention that one’s personal
education should be sufficient by stating, “According to [the source cited], Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) usually mature and find the balance necessary for maintaining professional boundaries and self between two and five years beyond graduate training.” Student 05 took the internal dialogue a bit further to an expert stance by stating, “To uphold my professional competence and integrity, I would take steps to remove myself as his therapist and refer him to a neutral therapist.” In the previous sentence, the student wrote, “I would put my feelings aside and discuss with him [the client] the implications of having a relationship with him.” For Students 05, 06, 07, the internal dialogue seemed to grow out of a position of being an “expert” (i.e., I know what is best for you more than you do).

Student 10 took it a bit further. She seemingly trusted her own “good ethical boundaries” to help her in this and other situations. She and several other students (e.g., Students 12 and 13) used their internal discourse primarily for the purpose of maintaining their own ethical boundaries. Student 12 made it explicit in claiming that her Christian values and her “strong family values” were protective factors against her falling into problems like the one in the given scenario. Across these internal dialogues, the students were largely unaware of other parties to their discourse. They saw the discourse as arising from within their personhood without an awareness of social and/or cultural factors contributing to the discourse. Power in the first discourse style arose from the students’ “expert” knowledge and “strong” personal and ethical values.

**Problem avoidance.** In the second discourse style, power came from the ability to avoid problems. Although this style was implicit in several of the students’ essay responses, it became explicit with Students 09 and 11. Student 11 even suggested that a therapist may have to avoid seeing certain types of clients as a way of avoiding problems. This student was one of the few to overtly suggest that she might seek personal therapy to see if there was “a way to eliminate the feelings, instead of having to cease treatment with the client.” She went on to write about not wanting the client to miss out on “an opportunity to benefit from the therapist’s knowledge and skills.” However, when she defined the problem, she did so primarily in terms of the client’s feelings for the therapist. This definition of the
“problem” is consistent with the way that most students framed their concerns. Like the majority of students, Student 09 wrote that she would inform the client that a social relationship would be unethical. Then, she would immediately seek “an appropriate referral” for the client. Even though Students 09 and 11 both stated that they would discuss the client’s feelings, it was clear that they had already decided what the therapist intended to do: refer the client to another therapist to avoid problems. Thus, the discourse was one-way and apparently aimed at the therapist’s maintaining positional power and assuring that the client did not gain power to harm the therapist. In these two essay responses, as in the majority of the others, there was little, if any, recognition of how such a conversation or the proposed referral might impact the client. There was even less awareness of how the proposed referral might influence the therapist, with the exception of its allowing the therapist to avoid the problem in this particular instance.

**Rule following.** Student 14 employed a third style of discourse. Like many others, this student based her internal discourse on “following the therapeutic rule guidelines as set forth [in the AAMFT Code of Ethics].” However, Student 14 wrote that she would also “seek out opinions from a more seasoned professional, specifically addressing my inner thoughts.” For this student, like Student 15 and others, consultation with another therapist was primarily sought for the therapist’s benefit. The function of such a consultation appeared to be primarily for the purpose of clarifying and strengthening the student-therapist’s own internal dialogue.

**Public trust.** However, Student 14 also joined Students 04, 06, and 08 in situating her actions as part of public trust. This student wrote that “accountability to the self, client, and profession require a constructed maintenance plan for my professional credibility...” Student 04 was even more explicit in stating that “the codes of ethics are set in place to strive for public trust and to define professional expectations in marriage and family therapists.” Student 06 framed public trust more in terms of the consequences of violating it: being sued, receiving legal fines, and being dismissed from one’s job. Still, these four students did recognize that the discourse occurs at more than an individual, private level. For them, the society in which one practices influenced the discourse about what is appropriate in any given circumstance.
Student 03 exhibited an interesting variation on the public trust discourse style. She wrote: "The Codes are in place to promote public confidence in the MFT’s profession and to set standards which to it adhere [sic]. Therefore, MFT’s have an obligation to prescribe [sic] to the highest standards within the Code at all times.” For Student 03, good citizenship was part of her personal responsibility. As a “good citizen of the profession,” she wrote that she followed the rules of the profession. For her, the ethical discourse was linear and hierarchical, from the profession to the therapist to the client.

**Emotional focus.** The final discourse style was grounded in an emotional focus. Six of the students employed this particular style. Student 06 made this focus evident by stating, “Therefore, in order to help clients understand their emotional and/or physical attraction to the therapist, clients must be helped to explore these emotions and discuss them in therapy... Therapists should confront their emotions and discuss them with the client.” Student 06 had a similar focus on emotions when describing the impact of engaging in a sexual relationship between a client and a therapist, such as feelings of isolation and guilt. However, again, the student assumed a sexual relationship when that was not obviously part of the given scenario. Nevertheless, Student 06 seemed to assume that therapy involved an equal sharing of emotional talk between the therapist and the client without an apparent awareness of how that shared power might disrupt therapy. Student 07 used a similar style of discourse. On the one hand, she normalized the feelings implied in the scenario by stating, "From a personal perspective it is normal for healthy men and women to have intimate thoughts that create sexual arousal. This can occur even when they are in relationship because it can be a spontaneous and biological function.” Her response was to engage in personal insight to examine her own feelings and to invite a colleague “to concentrate on the client’s feelings and help them [sic] identify people in his life that he could share feelings with besides me.” Student 04 wrote:

> I feel that the only way to solve this issue would be to recommend my client to another therapist. I feel that once those kinds of thoughts enter into the therapy setting, then I would not be able to help my client in the way s/he would truly need to be helped.

Although it is possible that Student 04 was making an error that is common in American culture (i.e., saying “I feel” when what one really means is “I think”), from the context, it appeared that she
really did mean that feelings often trumped thinking for her. Along with the other five students, she employed this style of discourse in suggesting that her personal feelings were a vital part of her internal discourse and would ultimately determine her response to any situation.

**Discussion**

There was remarkable similarity among all of the essay responses. None of the students had started seeing clients. However, a review of their progress in the program indicated that all of them had completed at least five of the six prerequisite courses, including a course in ethics and professional identity, before submitting their essays. It appeared that the students were gaining knowledge of the AAMFT Code of Ethics. In various ways, all 15 students indicated that they knew that having sex with a current or a former client was wrong, according to both their personal moral codes and the professional code of ethics. Further, all of them knew that they could not simply abandon a client. Instead, they had to take proper steps when choosing to refer a client. Thus, although it was not a primary focus of the study, it appears that students in an online environment can effectively articulate basic ethical principles related to the profession. However, consistent with what previous researchers found, there does seem to be less understanding about the issue of attraction in therapy and what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate handling of the inevitable multiple relationships that are likely to exist in the real world (Brock & Coufal, 1994; Nickell et al., 1995). This is where the findings from this study can add to the understanding in the field. Additionally, instruments, such as those by Briggs et al. (1999) as well as Nelson and Johnson (1999), can be useful in helping supervisors to create contexts for discussion and evaluation with students around both the recognition and the handling of these issues. These instruments allow them to approach the identification and management of these issues from a developmental perspective.

One of the most striking similarities across the responses examined in this study was the students’ “solution” to the dilemma presented in the scenario. All of them chose to refer the client to another therapist as the ultimate, and in many cases, only solution to the situation. Several of the students supported this decision by citing Principle 1.10 of the AAMFT Code of Ethics (2012), which mandates that “[m]arriage and
family therapists assist persons in obtaining other therapeutic services if the therapist is unable or unwilling, for appropriate reasons, to provide professional help.” Based on the essay responses, it is unclear whether the individual student was “unable or unwilling” to continue seeing the client. Some of the students, such as Student 05, explicitly stated that the client’s request for a social relationship made it necessary to refer the client “to uphold my professional competence and integrity...” Other students, such as Student 13, pushed responsibility onto the client by asking the client if the client would like a referral. Not one of the students demonstrated any awareness of how this discourse might influence the client, such as how it might make it more difficult for the client to trust a therapist in the future. Similarly, none of the students demonstrated awareness of how the simplistic solution might negatively impact the therapist’s own future functioning in similar situations (e.g., by reinforcing a pattern of cutting off “problematic” relationships, rather than working through them) (Bowen, 1993). These findings are in line with those of previous studies. Harris (1995) reported that students expressed uncertainty about how to handle attraction in therapy. Similarly, Harris and Harriger (2009) highlighted therapists’ uncertainty about how to discuss attraction in therapy.

The majority of the students appeared to be operating from an “expert” position. Although only Students 06 and 07 explicitly claimed an expert position, the overwhelming majority of them implied it in the way that they constructed their discourse. They seemingly assumed that their personal values and education would be sufficient to help them to discern the “right” answer. For most students, this answer was delivered unilaterally in a hierarchical manner. As Foucault (1980) suggested, the professional’s knowledge and ability to label situations yields power. Of the 15 students, 7 clearly defined the code of ethics in terms of “rules” that had to be followed. Knowledge of these rules was a large part of the professional’s power and protection. These rules, combined with one’s personal values, defined the scope of one’s personal responsibility, a concept highlighted by all 15 students.

Seven students mentioned some sort of consultation with a supervisor or professional peer, but the purpose of this consultation varied. Students 02 and Student 11 stated that they would seek personal therapy to try to discern what issues might have prompted their attraction to the
client. There was no indication that they envisioned that this consultation might benefit the client in some way. It was simply to make them even more of an “expert.” Most of the other students indicated that they would seek a professional consultation after they had already informed the client of the decision to refer, presumably to learn how to handle similar situations more effectively in the future (and, thus, become more of an “expert”). Again, this pattern of crafting themselves as the “expert” is consistent with both Foucault’s (1980) description of professional power and findings of previous researchers regarding therapists’ uncertainty about how to handle attraction in therapy ethically (Harris, 1995).

There was no evidence in any of the essays that the students were grasping for some sort of draconian power over the client, even though maintaining a power position was the net result of their proposed actions. Most of them explicitly acknowledged that Principle I of the AAMFT Code of Ethics (2012) highlights that the needs of the client are paramount. Instead, it appeared that they were simply unaware of the foreseeable impact of their actions within the therapeutic relationship system. It seems that ethics must be taught in context. That is, students need to learn early in their training that their behavior can have unintended consequences and that they need to think in terms of the total context to avoid these unintended consequences. Obviously, this total context includes the professional consultation required by Principle 3.3 of the AAMFT Code of Ethics (2012).

Given how important the students found the “expert” role to be, training and professional identity needs to explicitly include the concept that being a competent therapist, far from being antithetical to seeking consultation, actually requires active consultation with others (Harris & Harriger, 2009). That is, students must learn early in their training to situate ethical decisions within the realm of professional discourse, rather than the realm of internal, private discourse. Of course, students must learn how to seek such consultation and actively use peer support to maintain a relationship with the client without violating client confidentiality (AAMFT, 2012, Principle II).

Another piece of the total context is paying attention to what is actually present, rather than to one’s assumptions. As previously noted, many of the students assumed that the client was seeking a sexual relationship, when the client only
requested a social relationship. Although the requested relationship could foreseeably become sexual, by focusing on the student’s internal discourse as opposed to what was actually happening, most students labeled the client as “the problem.” This linear construction of the facts not only influenced the students to miss the real and very present danger of a potentially exploitative relationship, but it also allowed them to ignore their own vulnerabilities and complicity in the complexity of the given scenario (Brock & Coufal, 1994).

Yet another important piece of this total context is the social construction of knowledge (Foucault, 1980; Gergen, 1999; Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Students 04, 05, and 12 used terms, such as “multiple relationships,” without defining them. All of the students framed this scenario in heterosexual terms, yet none of them seemed to be aware of how cultural definitions of and expectations about sexuality contributed to their defining the situation in such terms. It raises questions about how the responses from students might have differed if the scenario specified that the client was of the same sex as the therapist. Similarly, many students cited their personal and, in some cases, religious values as being protective factors, yet none of them seemed to be aware of how these values were socially constructed and transmitted. For example, although three students self-identified as Christian, they showed no awareness of how others who would similarly self-identify as Christian might have a different set of values. This finding suggests that the teaching of ethics should include discourse about diversity while simultaneously avoiding unnecessary relativism. One possible way of doing this would be to borrow the discourse style from narrative ethicists, such as MacIntyre (1988), who offered a strong critique of the highly individualistic ethics of the Enlightenment and advocated for a return to a more teleological ethic based on shared narratives of virtue, such as the virtue ethics of Aristotle.

**Limitations**

The aforementioned results should be considered in light of the study’s limitations. The sample was relatively small, and data were collected from students at only one online university. As is the case with all qualitative research studies, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population of MFT students. This study serves more to generate hypotheses than to test them. Also, these students were all engaged in an
asynchronous online educational program. It is unclear if students in a synchronous online program or a brick-and-mortar institution would show similar styles of discourse. Given the consistency of the answers and the “fit” with some general cultural assumptions, it seems that there might be a fair degree of consistency across educational platforms.

**Recommendations**

As noted when describing the sample selection process, all 15 students eventually satisfactorily completed the ethics essay requirement. They all received asynchronous feedback from one of the clinical faculty members and integrated it into their responses to meet the standards described in the grading rubric. Based on the study of students’ pre-feedback styles, it appears that best practices in online professional ethics education should incorporate a more explicit focus on power as a dynamic in the professional relationship.

One recommendation is that ethics always be taught within a relational context. Although several students overtly referred to the therapist’s power in relation to the client, it appeared to be relegated to the realm of ideas. In the pre-feedback essays, there was little, if any, evidence of an ability to apply the concept of therapist power to the given scenario. In an in-classroom environment, it usually comes through a guided discussion of ethics cases. Although it was not part of this study, it appears that written case study essays followed by written feedback can accomplish similar ends. It is recommended that online ethics education include such strategies to help students to consider the relational implications of their proposed actions. Follow-up studies are also warranted to compare the effectiveness of written case studies with in-person discussion of case studies in teaching/learning ethical discourse.

Another component of the relational context is professional identity. The students all understood their identity as MFTs. Most of them were equally clear that they “ought” to assume an expert position. However, it was obvious that they overwhelmingly constructed “expert” to mean being completely self-sufficient and self-reliant. Although only the initial essay was analyzed, a scan of the subsequent submission(s) suggested that the concept of making effective use of professional peers and/or supervisors, especially after becoming licensed, was a difficult concept for some of the students to grasp. The clinical faculty
member had to provide this direct feedback several times to some students, suggesting that the findings of the formal analysis were not mere artifacts. It is recommended that ethics instruction be framed as a shared discourse and explicitly deal with the limitations of a private, internal discourse. It is unclear whether the curriculum currently contains such an emphasis. Based on the results of this study, the students consistently constructed their professional identity in unitary, rather than collaborative terms. This solitary discourse style increased, however inadvertently, the power differential between the therapist and the client in the scenario. In addition, many students tended to frame the therapist-client relationship in oppositional terms.

Future researchers might conduct a phenomenological investigation of students’ experiences dealing with their first real ethical concerns once they begin clinical training. These lived experiences could become a basis for a truly “participant ethics” (Kotze, Myburn, & Rous, 2012) understanding for future classes of students in ethics and professional identity. Another useful study would involve the application of the same methodology to other fields, including business, education, and psychology. Such an investigation should promote understanding of how students create solutions to the ethical dilemmas that they face in their professions.
References


Ethnic Identity, Other-Group Orientation, and Comfort with Sharing One's Ethnicity in an Online Graduate Learning Environment

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Abstract

As institutions of higher learning education continue to provide and as minority students continue to enroll in online courses, it is important to explore the degree to which these students' ethnic identities relate to their online learning experiences. The purpose of the current study was to investigate whether graduate students' ethnic identity and other-group orientation scores, as measured by the Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Questionnaire (Gaines, Bunce, Robertson, & Wright, 2010), were associated with their comfort with sharing their ethnicities in an online environment. The sample was comprised of 287 psychology online graduate students at a professional psychology academic institution. European-American participants were significantly less comfortable disclosing their ethnicity than Hispanic or Latino participants. In addition, a significant positive relationship was found between feeling a strong attachment toward one's own ethnic group and feeling comfortable disclosing one's ethnicity in an online learning environment. Based on these findings, it seems that online graduate students' identifying more strongly with their own ethnic groups may potentially increase their level of comfort and likelihood of self-disclosing their ethnicities, which may result in a transparent and open online learning community.

Keywords: graduate students; ethnicity; ethnic identity; other-group orientation; MEIM; online education
As trends in educational settings continue to veer toward the incorporation of online components, it is important to examine online environments more effectively to understand students’ experiences and the ways in which instructors can facilitate effective learning (Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014). Although considerable research has been conducted on the relationship between ethnic identity and both mental health and well-being (e.g., Burnett-Zeigler, Bohnert, & Ilgen, 2013; Lee, 2003, 2005), the relationship between ethnic identity and online learning experiences remains uncertain. Inclusive and safe learning communities are prerequisites of student academic success (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Further, acknowledgment of diversity issues for ethnic minority students is a major contributor to students’ sense of inclusion (Gouthro, 2004; Uzuner, 2009). Therefore, it is critical to understand the ramifications of ethnic disclosure within an online environment to equip instructors and administrators to address diversity within online courses and effectively serve a diverse student population (Lewis & Lee, 2014). Without such understanding, opportunities for rich, multicultural, and diverse dialogue; diverse perspectives on critical issues; and social benefits that may arise from student collaboration within a heterogeneous student body may be missed (Antonio et al., 2004; Fischer, 2008; Gurin, Dey, & Gurin, 2003).

**Ethnic Identity**

The concept of ethnic identity involves several components, such as self-labels, sense of belonging, and collective self-esteem (Costigan, Su, & Hua, 2009). A sense of belonging or commitment to one’s ethnic group may be the most important component of ethnic identity; however, commitment alone is not sufficient to create a confident identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Exploring one’s identity involves a range of activities, including reading and speaking with others as well as attending cultural events. Shared values are indicative of one’s closeness to the group, but this information frequently is limited because there is often heterogeneity within ethnic groups in terms of shared values and beliefs. Therefore, ethnic identity must be understood in relation to the prominent group culture of most minority members, such as national identity (e.g., American identity) (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Higher scores on ethnic identity measures have also been associated with a decreased
likelihood of developing mental health diagnoses throughout one’s lifetime for individuals who self-identified as African American, Hispanic/Latino/a, or Asian American (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2013). Moreover, ethnic identity has been examined as a potential protective factor or potential buffer against the deleterious effects of discrimination for a number of ethnic minority groups. Among Asian Americans, stronger ethnic identity and other-group orientation (OGO) were found to be positively correlated with psychological well-being (Lee, 2003). Ethnic identity may play an important role in the development of minority individuals’ identities; however, it does not appear to be the only factor protecting against the effects of discrimination. In a related study examining ethnic identity and OGO, Korean Americans who endorsed significant ethnic pride reported fewer depressive symptoms and higher social connectedness when the levels of discrimination were low (Lee, 2005). Nevertheless, as discrimination increased, the buffering effects of ethnic pride diminished, and depressive symptoms increased (Lee, 2005).

**Minority Student Learning Experiences**

Given the challenges that remain at learning institutions relating to ethnic inclusion, it is expected that certain factors may be more salient for ethnic minority students as they progress through systems of higher education. In a study conducted by Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, and Bowles (2008), African-American graduate students reported that they believed that their experiences differed significantly from those of their Caucasian-American counterparts. Specifically, these African-American students stated that their Caucasian-American peers experienced a significantly more positive and friendlier traditional campus setting than they. In addition, they indicated that African-American professors provided significantly more support than did Caucasian-American professors, African-American peers provided significantly more support than Caucasian-American peers, and Caucasian-American professors provided significantly more support than Caucasian-American peers. According to Johnson-Bailey et al., a significant number of the African-American students sampled noted that having more African-American professors and classmates would have made their experiences in graduate school more positive.

In a similar study, Clark, Mercer, Ziegler-Hill, and Dufrene (2012) compared the academic,
social, and emotional experience of ethnic minority and ethnic majority graduate psychology students. They found that ethnic minority students reported a significantly more negative race experience than non-minorities, which was associated with a higher level of emotional stress. In addition, the minority students in the study also reported feeling lower levels of belongingness compared to their non-minority counterparts.

Most of the relevant research on ethnic identity has been conducted with students in face-to-face courses at traditional brick-and-mortar universities. It is still unclear whether ethnicity disclosure in an online learning environment may provide similar benefits for ethnic minority students, particularly if instructors also share their ethnicities. Recent researchers have noted that the degree to which instructors in online classrooms consider the diversity of their student body is determinative of student sense of inclusion during the course (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Forde, 2014; Uzuner, 2009). As students’ abilities to feel included and supported in their learning have the capacity to influence academic performance, emphasizing a sense of community among students may be important for student success (Forde, 2014; Gouthro, 2004). This may be particularly important for ethnic minority students, as these individuals have endorsed experiencing significant amounts of discrimination on their respective campuses (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Nevertheless, it is unclear whether ethnic minority students have a greater preference for sense of community or connectedness than non-minority students (Cokley, Hall-Clark, & Hicks, 2011).

Disclosure of ethnicity by minority students in online learning environments has been observed to be somewhat “high-risk” in nature, with many students preferring the option of anonymity when dialogues containing racially charged content arise (Guy, 2001). In addition, despite its observed benefits and contributions, many individuals still have negative perceptions toward the pursuit of ethnic diversity within an academic setting, as it has historically been met with resistance from both faculty members and students (Cokley et al., 2010). However, strong ethnic identity development has been correlated with social connection and personal well-being (Smith & Sylva, 2011). Given that it has been described as a potential buffer against the impact of discrimination, this construct is likely to play a similar role in online learning communities (Lee,
2003; Lee, 2005). Therefore, further examining student ethnic identity and ethnicity disclosure may shed light on the best ways to foster an inclusive online learning environment and potentially assist students in improving academic performance.

**Current Study**

The purpose of the current quantitative correlational study was to enhance understanding of how ethnic identity and OGO relate to comfort with the self-disclosure of ethnicity among graduate students enrolled in online courses. The corresponding objectives of this study were to examine (1) the structure of a newly developed instrument to measure disclosure of ethnicity (2) ethnic group differences in disclosure comfortability, (3) the relationship between disclosure of ethnicity and ethnic identity, and (4) the relationship between disclosure of ethnicity and OGO.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from all master's- and doctoral-level psychology graduate students with a valid school email address at a professional psychology academic institution enrolled in online courses. In total, there were 287 participants, including 49 men (17.1%) and 205 women (71.4%). However, 31 participants (10.8%) did not indicate their sex and 2 participants (0.7%) preferred not to answer. With regard to age, 73 participants (25.4%) were between 26-29 years, 72 participants (25.1%) were between 22-25, 53 participants (18.4%) were between 30-39 years, 30 participants (10.5%) provided no answer, 27 participants (9.4%) between 40-49, 20 participants (7.0%) between 50-59, 8 participants (2.8%) 60 and over, 3 participants (1.0%) preferred not to share, and 1 participant (0.3%) reported being between the ages of 18-21.

In terms of ethnicity, one participant (0.3%) reported being American Indian or Native American, 9 participants (3.1%) reported being Asian or Asian American (including Chinese, Japanese, and others), 21 participants (7.3%) reported being Mixed (parents are from two different ethnic groups), 24 participants (8.4%) reported being Hispanic or Latino (including Mexican American and Central American), 43 participants (15.0%) reported being African American, and 147 participants (51.2%) reported being Anglo, or European American (not Hispanic). In addition, 19 participants (6.6%)
provided no answer and 23 (8.0%) indicated Other. All respondents were included as participants because each respondent replied to at least one demographic question. In addition, for each inferential statistic performed, items with no response were treated as missing data; consequently, cases with missing data were excluded from the analysis.

**Materials**

**Disclosure of ethnicity questionnaire.**

A demographic/disclosure questionnaire was distributed that included questions on age, sex, and ethnicity. It also included seven statements related to the disclosure of ethnicity that were developed based on a review of the scholarly literature. For the items, participants indicated their level of agreement on a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The items included in the instrument are included in Table 1.

**MEIM.** A revised 15-item version of the original MEIM (Phinney, 1992) was used to assess ethnic identity search and affirmation, belonging, and commitment. Ethnic identity is conceptualized as “a sense of self as a group member that develops over time through an active process of investigation, learning, and commitment” (Phinney & Ong, 2007, p. 279). An example of a MEIM item includes, “I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.” Participants indicated their level of agreement with the items on a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The revised MEIM has been shown to have good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alphas above .80 across a wide range of ethnic groups and ages (Cheng, Kwan, & Sevig, 2013; Phinney, 1992).

The OGO is a separate six-item scale from the original MEIM that was not included in the revised-MEIM. OGO assesses individuals’ involvement and approach toward persons of different ethnic groups besides their own (Cheng et al., 2013; Phinney, 1992). An example of an OGO item includes, “I often spend time with people from ethnic groups other than my own.” Similarly to the revised MEIM, participants indicate their level of agreement with items on a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The original MEIM subscales of Ethnic Identity and OGO were found to be distinct, with good levels of internal consistency and moderate degrees of construct
Results of previous research using the OGO showed that it had acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alphas of .72 (Cheng et al., 2013) and .74 (Phinney, 1992) in samples of diverse college students.

Procedure

An invitation to participate in the current study was distributed via email through SurveyMonkey.com to psychology master’s- and doctoral-level graduate students with a valid email address obtained from the school’s directory. Within the body of the email, participants were informed of the title of the study, approximate time needed to complete the survey instrument, types of questions asked, and voluntary nature of the study. The email also contained a link to participate in an online survey. Participants were first directed to an informed consent page. They were instructed to select “I agree” to the informed consent if they were interested in participation.

Results

Structure of Disclosure of Ethnicity Questionnaire

To identify the underlying factors of the disclosure of ethnicity instrument, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted using the principal component analysis (PCA) extraction method combined with the direct oblimin rotation method. This rotation method was chosen to ensure that the factors generated were correlated. Factor analysis with multivariate examination was done to produce factor scores with the goal of detecting outliers. In all, three cases with factor scores greater than or equal to ±3 were identified as outliers (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009). Two factor analyses (one with all cases and the other excluding the outliers) were conducted. Due to the similarities in the factor loading and communalities results of both analyses, it was concluded that the three outliers did not have an adverse impact on the factor analysis results. After checking for multicollinearity, results showed that none of the items were highly correlated (see Table 1). According to Field (2005), having a correlation coefficient of .9 should be a cause for concern. The result of the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO=.634) suggested that the sample (n=287) was factorable. Similarly, Bartlett’s test of sphericity produced a significant result ($\chi^2(21) = 253.87, p = .0001$). In all, three components were found with an eigenvalue of greater than 1: disclosure
comfortability, disclosure preference, and control. Due to the exploratory nature of the current study
Using this cutoff and a significant factor criterion as well as the percent of variance explained, all
of .4, three factors were found to explain a three factors were included in the analyses below, cumulative variance of 66.47% (see Table 2). The despite the low Cronbach’s alpha for preference as Cronbach’s alphas for the four disclosure well as the minimal item loadings on preference comfortability items and two disclosure and control (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011; Yong & preference items were .70 and .52, respectively. Pearce, 2013).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I am comfortable sharing my</td>
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<tr>
<td>ethnicity in an online learning environment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I usually disclose my ethnicity in an online learning environment.</td>
<td>.501**</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. It is important to me that</td>
<td>.226**</td>
<td>.434**</td>
<td>_</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>peers/faculty are aware of my</td>
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<td>ethnicity in an online learning environment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. There are opportunities for me to</td>
<td>.241**</td>
<td>.417**</td>
<td>.411**</td>
<td>_</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>share my ethnicity in an online</td>
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<td>learning environment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Being in an online learning</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>-.046</td>
<td>-.033</td>
<td>.027</td>
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<tr>
<td>environment provides me with</td>
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<td>control over whether or not I</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>choose to disclose my ethnicity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I prefer taking online courses because I do not want my peers or</td>
<td>-.191**</td>
<td>-.049</td>
<td>-.010</td>
<td>-.029</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>_</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>instructors to know my ethnic background.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. In contrast to a traditional</td>
<td>-.123</td>
<td>-.041</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.101</td>
<td>.163*</td>
<td>.390**</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classroom setting, I appreciate having the option of whether or</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>not to disclose my ethnicity when taking an online course.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p<0.05, **p<0.01
Table 2

Component Loading for Disclosure of Ethnicity Instrument Items Using Direct Oblimin Rotation Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Comfortability</th>
<th>Preference</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. I usually disclose my ethnicity in an online learning environment.</td>
<td>.816</td>
<td>-.092</td>
<td>-.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It is important to me that peers/faculty are aware of my ethnicity in an online learning environment.</td>
<td>.746</td>
<td>.101</td>
<td>-.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. There are opportunities for me to share my ethnicity in an online learning environment.</td>
<td>.736</td>
<td>.149</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I am comfortable sharing my ethnicity in an online learning environment.</td>
<td>.576</td>
<td>-.366</td>
<td>.269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I prefer taking online courses because I do not want my peers or instructors to know my ethnic background.</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.808</td>
<td>-.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. In contrast to a traditional classroom setting, I appreciate having the option of whether or not to disclose my ethnicity when taking an online course.</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>.804</td>
<td>.234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Being in an online learning environment provides me with control over whether or not I choose to disclose my ethnicity.</td>
<td>-.083</td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>.949</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eigenvalues  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Comfortability</th>
<th>Preference</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% of Variance  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Comfortability</th>
<th>Preference</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30.70</td>
<td>21.02</td>
<td>14.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethnic Group Differences in Disclosure Comfortability

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether ethnic differences existed in disclosure comfortability (i.e., comfort level of disclosing ethnicity in an online learning environment) (see Table 3 for mean scores). Only one significant difference was found across ethnic groups ($F(5, 262) = 4.428, p = .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .078$). Using the Bonferroni post-hoc test, a significant difference was found between Anglo, European-American participants and Hispanic or Latino participants ($p = .008$), with the latter ethnic group showing significantly greater comfortability with disclosing ethnicity.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Asian American, including Chinese, Japanese, and Others</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino, including Mexican American, Central American, and Others</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, Caucasian, Anglo, European American; Not Hispanic</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed; Parents are from Two Different Groups</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationship Between Disclosure of Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity

Correlational analyses were conducted to determine whether a significant relationship existed between ethnic identity and disclosure comfortability, preference, and control. A significant positive relationship was found between ethnic identity and disclosure comfortability ($r(266) = .272, p = .001$). No significant relationships were found between ethnic identity and disclosure preference ($r(254) = .066, p = .294$) or control ($r(250) = .123, p = .051$).
Relationship Between Disclosure of Ethnicity and OGO

Correlational analyses were conducted between OGO and disclosure comfortability, preference, and control. Results indicated that there were no statistically significant relationships between OGO and comfortability ($r(266) = .082, p = .183$), preference ($r(254) = -.042, p = .501$), and control ($r(250) = .091, p = .143$).

Discussion

Given the impact of ethnic identity disclosure on students’ learning experiences at traditional brick-and-mortar institutions, the purpose of the current study was to enhance understanding of how self-disclosure of ethnicity for graduate students who are enrolled in online courses relates to ethnic identity and OGO. Previous researchers indicated that minority students’ perceived discrimination is a significant (although weak) mediator between ethnicity and emotional distress, which may impact one’s ability to engage fully in the learning process and have an overall positive learning experience (Cokley et al., 2011). Similarly, being considered demographically different from the majority of other students was found to have a negative impact on an individual’s class performance in a traditional graduate-level classroom setting (Flynn, Chatman, & Spataro, 2001). However, online settings must be given unique consideration, as one’s ethnicity and overall appearance may be made more explicit in an in-person, face-to-face classroom setting. This is particularly true for courses without video-chat components, given that these learners are only able to identify classmates by their names and the information that they choose to share throughout the course. Instructors may benefit from a greater understanding of the online dynamics among students, particularly with regard to ethnic differences, to create an environment in which all students have the capacity to be successful.

In an attempt to capture ethnicity disclosure in an online setting, a number of items were developed in the current study. Three factors emerged through EFA (i.e., disclosure comfortability, disclosure preference, and control); however, only disclosure comfortability was usable in the current study. No significant relationships or differences were found for disclosure preference or control. This is likely due to one to two items loading on each of the latter factors as well as the low internal consistency.
found for disclosure preference (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011; Yong & Pearce, 2013).

Nevertheless, important relationships were found regarding students’ comfort with disclosing their ethnicity. For example, online graduate students who self-identified as being members of ethnic minority groups tended to be more comfortable with disclosing their ethnicities than their Anglo or European-American peers in general. However, further analysis revealed that significant differences in disclosure comfortability existed only between Hispanic or Latino and Anglo or European-American students. According to Archer (1980), “[S]elf-disclosure is an act of revealing personal information about oneself to others” (p. 183). It might be that because Anglo or European Americans are in the majority group, it might seem odd, uncomfortable, or unnecessary for students in this ethnic group to disclose their ethnicity. Perhaps ethnic majority group membership is assumed to be Anglo or European, unless otherwise stated, in an online educational setting.

Other factors, such as trust, might also be a factor in ethnic identity disclosure. Typically, a relationship of trust first needs to be established, where casual information is shared before connections are solidified. It is reportedly only after trust is gained that individuals reveal more important personal information (Bargh et al., 2002). However, self-disclosure tends to occur more quickly in online settings than in face-to-face settings (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). According to Joinson (2004), discussions in online contexts lead to more than four times the amount of self-disclosure when compared to face-to-face conversations. In addition, Joinson (2004) found that self-disclosure significantly increased when visual anonymity was assured. Minority online graduate students might encounter the means in online education to self-disclose personal information, including their ethnicities, because anonymity is somewhat protected. Given that discrimination is still prevalent among ethnic minority students on traditional campuses (Hall, Williams, Penhollow, Rhoads, & Hunt, 2015; Rosenbloom & Way, 2014), online education may be considered the most favorable environment for self-disclosure.

In this study, higher ethnic identity scores were found to be positively correlated with disclosure comfortability. This finding is consistent with those of previous researchers who described the benefits of strong ethnic identities,
such as social connection, personal well-being, and buffering against the impact of discrimination (Lee, 2003; Lee, 2005). Further, social connection and personal well-being in online graduate education may increase the sense of belonging and assist in the development of strong communities, which are identified as relevant components to maximize students' academic experience (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Sense of community appears to positively influence students' sense of belonging, further enhancing the feeling that students are part of a group, which subsequently fosters their efforts to work together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sense of community can potentially decrease students' isolation; encourage participation and social connection; and facilitate the decision to self-disclose. Therefore, ethnic identity disclosure may contribute to social connection, which may positively influence the online learning community as a whole, subsequently fostering a supportive learning environment (Gouthro, 2004; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; Uzuner, 2009).

Although previous researchers have deemed online ethnic disclosure to be "high-risk" for minority students (Guy, 2001), findings of the current study suggest that a well-developed ethnic identity is positively correlated with the likelihood of self-disclosure. Disclosure comfortability was not found to have a significant association with participants' involvement and approach toward those of other ethnic groups (OGO). This finding is not surprising, given that the majority of participants identified as Anglo or European American and preferred to not disclose; however, they self-selected to attend a university at which diversity was emphasized. In addition, one's attitudes toward interactions with people from diverse ethnic groups may be correlated with a desire for others to be unaware of one's ethnic background (Phinney, 1992). Individuals who prefer to engage only with persons belonging to their same ethnic group may prefer an online setting, as they might have the option to refrain from sharing their ethnic backgrounds with others. Perhaps online learning may benefit both those who disclose their ethnicities to foster community and connectivity and those who prefer not to disclose, thereby refraining from clearly identifying with a certain ethnic group in the online classroom.
Limitations

The limitations of this study should be considered when examining these study findings. Participants were graduate students enrolled at a psychology-oriented, private graduate institution with a major focus on diversity. For this reason, the students at this institution may have been more likely to value diversity and the development of ethnic identity than graduate students in the general population or perhaps in different areas of study. Moreover, women made up approximately 80% of the sample. Therefore, their reports may not be reflective of the experiences of both men and transgendered individuals studying in this program. It is also important to note that the majority of students identified as Anglo or European American and other ethnic groups had relatively low representation (e.g., Asian American \( n = 9 \)). The capacity in which students engaged in online learning was also not explicitly addressed. It is possible that some students had significant histories of online learning, whereas other students may have only been enrolled in one or two online courses. The disclosure process might be different after one has had years of experience participating in online learning communities as opposed to having only completed one online graduate course.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers might compare results from strictly online students with those from strictly on-ground students and blended (on-ground and online) students. Doing so may allow for comparisons regarding the opinions and comfort levels of students from various learning environments to others and may potentially reveal motivating factors for ethnicity disclosure among online graduate students. Further, in the current study, it was discovered that students from minority ethnic groups felt more comfortable with disclosing their ethnic backgrounds in online learning environments when compared to their Anglo or European-American (not Hispanic) peers. Future researchers might examine the elements that contribute to feeling comfortable and consequent disclosure as well as the reasons why European-American (not Hispanic) students were least comfortable with disclosure. The recognition of these elements might potentially assist instructors in developing specific strategies and online pedagogy to support students who are reticent in disclosing ethnicity.
Finally, future researchers might administer similar questionnaires to online graduates students who are not enrolled in diversity-focused programs. In addition, experiences with racial/ethnic discrimination should also be taken into consideration. Such research would allow for a comparison of students who have experienced racial/ethnic discrimination to those who have not. Findings may reveal that students who have encountered significant discrimination would view their self-disclosure as “high-risk” compared to those who have not.

**Conclusion**

Interactions with diverse peers in traditional, face-to-face learning environments reportedly foster positive learning and democratic outcomes for Caucasian, African-American, and Latino individuals. Specifically, learning outcomes have included engagement, motivation to think deeply about social phenomena, and self-assessed gains in academic skills. This exposure fostered a commitment to promote racial understanding, perspective taking, and involvement in political affairs and community service (Gurin et al., 2003). Nevertheless, understanding of whether these outcomes would hold true for online learning communities is limited. If students refrain from disclosing their ethnicities online and/or instructors do not provide a safe space for them to do so comfortably, one may assume that these gains may be lessened if not lost entirely.

Processing and acknowledging diversity in a classroom setting has been posited as a contributor to an inclusive learning environment in traditional classrooms, which fosters student growth (Gouthro, 2004; Uzuner, 2009). It is possible that this may be achieved in online communities via increased self-disclosure of ethnicity.
References


Adjunct Faculty Members’ Perceptions of Online Education Compared to Traditional Education

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Abstract

Due to the growth of online courses and universities, the quality and benefits of distance education warrant scholarly attention. Previous researchers have focused on students’, employers’, and traditional professors’ perspectives of online courses. Although adjunct professors teach the majority of online courses, few researchers have explored their opinions of online education compared to traditional, face-to-face education. Also lacking is information about online instructors’ perceptions of the online teaching position. The purpose of this report was to present online adjunct faculty members’ perceptions of online education in relation to traditional education. Sixty-eight adjunct faculty members who were recruited through LinkedIn voluntarily completed an instrument that was developed for this purpose. Given that this report represents an initial attempt to understand this phenomenon, preliminary results are reported as descriptive statistics. Overall, the online adjunct faculty members held favorable opinions of online education and believed that others did as well. Although they reported grading similarly in online courses as in traditional courses, the online adjunct faculty members reported that students thought that online professors graded more easily. Limitations and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: online; traditional; education; adjunct; faculty

As access to online courses continues to grow (Mayadas, Bourne, & Bacsich, 2009), researchers have focused their attention on perceptions of online education, especially among students (e.g., Simon, Jackson, & Maxwell, 2014) and employers (e.g., Adams & Defleur, 2006). It is possible that online faculty members might offer a different perspective of online learning than...
students and employers. Wilkes, Simon, and Brooks (2006) asked business professors who taught traditional courses to report their perceptions of online courses. Although the majority of them stated that they would consider teaching online, they had concerns about quality. Wilkes et al. also found that traditional students had more positive perceptions of online education than professors. Thornton (2013) reported that faculty members’ greatest concerns about online education involved the social and communicative interactions in addition to pedagogical issues. Nevertheless, Fillion, Limayem, Laferriere, and Mantha (2008) found that onsite education was no more effective than online education. Furthermore, they reported that online students were more satisfied than those at traditional institutions.

In their attempt to determine if students’ success rates were different in online courses versus traditional courses, Wilson and Allen (2010) found that the delivery method was less important than the quality of the contact received from the instructor. In terms of pedagogy, online courses may be updated easily, which makes them flexible (Reid, 2012). The ability to keep courses current and relevant may impact the quality of the material and the ability of faculty members to deliver what they consider to be useful information.

Although some opponents to online education worry about how actively responsive online faculty members can be, Otter et al. (2013) found that they made themselves more available to their students than faculty members at traditional institutions. McCann and Holt (2009) argued that online faculty members were accessible and less stressed than faculty members at traditional brick-and-mortar institutions. Furthermore, Otter et al. stated that online faculty members did not believe that they were weaker or less qualified than faculty members who taught traditional courses. Meyer (2012) found that faculty members who taught online courses had more time to spend on other activities, such as research.

Despite the existence of this literature on perceptions of online education, research on online faculty members’ perceptions is scant (McLawhon & Cutright, 2012). In particular, research on adjunct faculty members’ opinions of how online education compares to traditional
education is lacking. Such research is relevant and timely, as many people consider traditional education to be the standard by which online education should be evaluated. Furthermore, the perceptions of online faculty members may provide some insight into the quality of online education. Reid (2012) argued that it is important to understand faculty members’ perceptions because they can impact both how they handle innovative change in education and how successful students are. Similarly, Meyer and McNeal (2011) contended that online faculty members can help to contribute to the discussion about how to be advocates of innovation.

Method

The purpose of this report was to present online adjunct faculty members’ perceptions of online education in relation to traditional education. To achieve this purpose, a 12-item instrument developed using SurveyMonkey was made available in a LinkedIn group of online adjunct professors. Two of the items were demographic in nature and were used to obtain information about participants’ sex and years of experience teaching online. The remaining items included multiple-choice responses to items about respondents’ preferences and perceptions of online education as compared to traditional education.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a LinkedIn group of online adjunct professors, a forum where discussion of online issues freely occurred. Due to their educational credentials and voluntary group membership, it was assumed that these faculty members had taught or taken at least one course in both an online and a traditional brick-and-mortar setting. Although it can be difficult to determine the actual number of active members in a LinkedIn group, the selected group apparently had 963 members. However, based on responses within the group, many of the members did not participate on a regular basis. From these 963 members, 68 submitted responses. Of the respondents, 40 (59%) were female. In terms of online teaching experience, 13 (19%) had fewer than 3 years, 27 (40%) had 3 to 8 years, and 28 (41%) had more than 8 years.

Materials

For the purposes of this report, a 12-item instrument was created. Items were designed to assess participants’ perceptions of online learning.
including their opinions of online education versus traditional education in terms of quality and pay as well as grading. Participants rated their perceptions of online education on each of these items as inferior, superior, or the same as traditional education. Then, they provided reports on how they believed students and employers perceive online education as compared to traditional education. Finally, participants indicated what they perceived as the best and the worst part of teaching online courses from structured responses, including pay, time required, perceptions of others, and interaction with students. The instrument was pilot tested with adjunct online professors before being posted in the LinkedIn group as recommended by Radhakrishna (2007).

Procedure

The instrument was posted in the LinkedIn group with a note asking members to participate in a brief survey of their opinions of online education. The instructions included the requirement that they provide a name (real or otherwise) to acknowledge that they read the consent form; however, their data were assigned numbers to maintain anonymity. Several attempts were made to obtain responses; however, due to the nature of LinkedIn groups, not all members access them on a regular basis. Email requests were sent to group members in addition to the posted requests. After several weeks of no additional responses based on these attempts, a total of 68 responses were included in the analyses.

Results

Quality of Curriculum

The majority (66%) of participants reported that online curricula were similar in quality to traditional curricula; however, 14% believed that online curricula were superior. In addition, the majority (68%) of participants indicated that they believed that employers thought that online curricula were inferior to traditional curricula, whereas only 4% indicated that they believed that employers thought that online curricula were superior. Furthermore, the majority (62%) of participants reported that online curricula would be viewed as similar in quality to traditional curricula in the future, whereas 7% believed that online curricula would be viewed as inferior to traditional curricula.
Grading

The majority (46%) of participants reported using the provided grading rubrics and perceived them to be set up well. However, 20% of them indicated that they used the provided rubrics, but did not believe that they were set up well. Another 26% of participants reported that they created their own rubrics, whereas the remaining 9% claimed to use no rubric. The majority (70%) of participants indicated that they assigned grades in online courses similar to those of traditional courses. Nevertheless, 16% of them indicated that they assigned lower grades in online courses, and 14% reported that they assigned higher grades. Most (70%) participants believed that online students expected higher grades due to their belief that online courses were easier than traditional courses. Yet, 27% of them reported that they believed that students expected similar grades in online courses and traditional courses, whereas 3% indicated that they believed that students expected lower grades in online courses.

Job Perception

The majority (43%) of participants indicated that they believed that they could make more money teaching online courses as opposed to traditional courses. However, 34% of them perceived no difference between the two in terms of potential earnings, and 23% believed that they could make more money teaching traditional courses. The majority (37%) of participants endorsed time requirements for teaching as the worst aspect of teaching online, although 34% of participants indicated that the perception of online teaching by others was the worst aspect. Yet, 16% of them endorsed pay as the worst aspect of teaching online, with 13% of them selecting virtual interaction with students. The majority (54%) of participants reported that the best aspect of teaching online was the virtual interaction with students. However, 27% endorsed time requirements, and 11% selected pay as the best aspect of teaching online. The remaining 7% indicated that the best part of teaching online was the perception of it by others.

Discussion

The results presented in this report provide initial insights into online adjunct professors’ perceptions of online education. Consistent with the findings of Ward, Peters, and Shelley (2010), the majority of participants...
perceived the quality of online education to be the same as that of traditional education. Whereas most of them reported grading using equal standards in online courses and traditional courses, the majority of them believed that students expected faculty members in online courses to grade more easily. This perception of student expectations appears to be in line with previous findings that students expect to receive higher grades in online courses (Hannay & Newvine, 2006). Furthermore, most participants reported that they believed that they can make more money teaching online than in a traditional setting. In terms of perceptions of the best and the worst aspects of teaching online, the majority of participants endorsed student interaction and time requirements, respectively.

Limitations

The results presented in this report should be considered in light of its limitations. Data were collected from a relatively small number of online adjunct professors in one LinkedIn group. The extent to which this report’s findings generalize to other online professors is unclear. It was assumed that individuals in the LinkedIn group from which the data were collected had taken or taught at least one course in both an online and a traditional setting. It is possible that one or more of them did not have experience with online education, which might have impacted their perceptions. In addition, no data were collected on the specific universities at which they had experience. It is possible that perceptions varied within and between participants based on the specific institutions, rather than larger differences in online versus traditional education. Also, the data-collection instrument was developed for the purpose of this report. Although a pilot test was conducted, the psychometric properties were not examined.

Recommendations for Future Research

This report represents an initial attempt to understand online adjunct faculty members’ perceptions of online education. Additional research is needed, given the complexities associated with comparing online education and traditional education (Gilles, Detroz, & Blais, 2011). Gathering data from faculty members who are currently teaching both online courses and face-to-face courses (or even the same course both online and face-to-face) at the same university might limit the influence of
confounding variables and enhance understanding in terms of their perceptions of the two. Future researchers might also explore perceptions of online courses without comparison to traditional courses, as doing so implies that the latter is the standard to which the former should be compared. In addition, they might take working conditions into account, as they may impact online faculty members’ opinions of the job. Beck (2007) stated that each online university may have unique training and job requirements. Administrators at some online institutions provide more guidance, pay more, have larger class sizes, conduct more reviews, and/or require more activities than others (Beck, 2007). These differences might make it difficult to compare online education and traditional education from an online faculty member’s perspective.

It has been reported that perceptions of the quality of online education vary due to factors, including the structure and requirements of each course (Dykman & Davis, 2008). Part of the challenge associated with understanding perceptions of online education is that online courses may differ from traditional courses due to the technology, abilities, and skills involved (Reid, 2012). Some faculty members may view themselves as facilitators, rather than as central characters in the course. Future researchers might examine the influence of these factors more closely. Furthermore, a data-collection instrument might be developed, pilot tested, and evaluated in terms of soundness to ensure both validity and reliability. Also, a qualitative study might be conducted to obtain richer data that could help to uncover some of the reasoning behind some of the responses.

**Conclusion**

Online education is in its infancy; however, it continues to grow at a rapid pace. Despite some of the controversy surrounding it, preliminary findings presented in this report suggest that many online adjunct professors view online courses positively in comparison to traditional courses. However, they seem to believe that others, including students and employers, view them more negatively. In addition, many of the online adjunct professors in this study appear to view teaching online courses as an opportunity to earn as much or more money than teaching traditional courses. Nevertheless, the amount of time spent teaching was frequently cited as both a
positive and a negative aspect of online courses, suggesting some variability across online faculty members. The main person with whom students connect in online courses is the professor, whose opinions may help to guide curriculum development. The findings of this report suggest that online adjunct professors generally hold favorable views of online education, but struggle with the negative views of others. These findings are important, as they are the ones who are delivering and, at times, designing the curriculum. Consequently, they might be in the best position to provide evaluations of online courses as compared to traditional courses.
References


Transitioning from Face-to-Face to Entirely Virtual Instruction: Beginning the Journey and Finding Support

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Abstract

Faculty transitioning from traditional face-to-face doctoral teaching and mentoring to completely online might struggle without the proper supports and training. Current models offer faculty guidance in successful transition; however, additional scholarly attention to this process is warranted.

Keywords: online teaching; mentoring; support; professional development

Embarking on an online doctoral education and preparing to teach in an entirely online environment arguably require similar skills, perseverance, and dedication. The two processes are parallel, distinct in their perspective, but identical in terms of their underlying goal. They represent a journey focused on ultimate success. For the student, it is a terminal degree. For the faculty member, it is the student’s acquisition of knowledge. In the online modality, both of these goals are often completed without face-to-face interaction and take place in concurrent, albeit vastly different locations throughout the world. There are challenges associated with transitioning from face-to-face instruction to completely online instruction, while maintaining these two ultimate goals.

Beginning in the 21st century, the shifting paradigm from face-to-face to online instruction has been well-documented (Harasim, 2000). Nearly 15 years later, focus on the differences between virtual classrooms via distance learning and digital learning platforms in relation to face-to-face teaching in traditional classrooms is robust (Chang, Shen, & Liu, 2014). Nevertheless, research regarding teaching and learning in online doctoral programs is still relatively sparse (Gazza, 2014). The current literature describes the differences between face-to-face and online instruction as considerable (Robinson, Phillips,
Sheffield, & Moore, 2014), although additional research is needed to determine if these differences are applicable to online doctoral students, given their unique academic journey.

One of the main differences in online education is that the interactions between students and faculty members are primarily text-based (Lapadat, 2002). This is potentially problematic for doctoral students, who require more of a personal connection with a mentor (Rogers & Fleck, 2014). Furthermore, whereas many online faculty members do integrate different audio and video components into the course, written text is the main medium of communication between students, their peers, and the teacher (Bejerano, 2008). This calls into question what types of support online doctoral students and faculty members are receiving. Most doctoral students at traditional universities have face-to-face support from their graduate cohort, whereas online doctoral students often find themselves isolated (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Future research would benefit from a focus on how these primary differences in distance education impact online doctoral teaching and learning.

Many online faculty members report that they entered the teaching profession because they have a passion for their subject area, but they have found that they lose out on the relational rewards associated with teaching a live audience, building relationships with students, and mentoring due to distance created by space and time (Bejerano, 2008). These differences are particularly relevant to faculty members who are in the process of undergoing a paradigm shift of their own. For a tenure-track professor who is transitioning from a traditional face-to-face classroom to an entirely online classroom for the same brick-and-mortar university, "the goal is to turn a potentially chaotic online classroom experience into something that is structured, defined, and successful" (Paynter & Barnes, 2014, p. 1570). This can be especially challenging for faculty members who are mentoring doctoral students online due to the lack of structure in such a program once students complete their coursework (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Additional research is needed to inform faculty members and students on best practices during these transitions.

One place to start might be Covington, Petherbridge, and Warren’s (2005) triangulated model of support, which includes administrative support, peer support, and professional development. Given the dearth of scholarly...
literature on online doctoral education, these more informal sources of support might be of paramount importance for faculty transitioning to online doctoral education. As discussed further below, traditional faculty members should seek out the support of fellow faculty members who have already made the transition to teaching doctoral students online, the department chair, and the college dean when making the transition to becoming a fully online faculty member. It is also essential that faculty members focus on professional development to obtain the requisite knowledge and skills to become successful online instructors to provide the best possible instruction and mentorship to online doctoral students. For example, traditional faculty members who are accustomed to mentoring students face-to-face need to learn how to communicate as effectively at a distance and still maintain personal connections (Rogers & Fleck, 2014).

Covington and colleagues’ (2005) three aspects of the triangulated approach to online teaching are particularly relevant in terms of the hallmark tripartite focus of any tenure-track faculty member (i.e., research, service, and teaching). Although it is certainly feasible for a faculty member to teach and conduct research remotely, the area of service is not quite as easy to complete from a distance. This is especially the case when traditional brick-and-mortar institutions do not have the technology in place for faculty members who are not on campus to participant in meetings. It is important for faculty members to work with their department chairs and colleagues to ensure inclusion and involvement in necessary service-related activities.

Support

In terms of peer support, teaching online can have some drawbacks that most traditional courses at brick-and-mortar institutions do not. For example, one of the biggest concerns for many faculty members who teach online is community of practice, which is a collection of individuals in the online context who have similar interests or share common goals (Pan et al., 2015). Here, individuals can come together to share their resources, develop working strategies, solve problems, and improve individually. Online communities of practice have become an important platform on which many online faculty members rely for support (Tseng & Kuo, 2014). Most of these communities are established by the
university so that faculty members who are now teaching fully online can join the discussion and gain support. However, for those who are transitioning to teaching online for a traditional brick-and-mortar school, those communities may have not been created.

There are a number of ways in which faculty members can create their own community of practice. For example, they might hold monthly Skype meetings with their department chair where they can discuss any issues that might have arisen with their doctoral students. Additional administrative support can come in the form of bi-monthly Skype meetings with the program director of the online program so that they can keep each other abreast about students, share any concerns, and talk about the program itself. Faculty members can also hold informal bi-weekly meetings with other online faculty members to discuss areas of concern, seek guidance, and brainstorm solutions. The focus of all of these interactions is to maintain support and personal relationships that are often lost in online environments.

**Professional Development**

In terms of professional development, faculty members must learn to navigate the multitude of online learning tools, which will be an ongoing pursuit given the rapid changes in technology. The plethora of different learning management systems is as varied as the universities and colleges that use them (Mueller, Offerdahl, & Boyer, 2014). Swimming through the possibilities is a dizzying and often formidable process. In addition, the tools that can be used within learning platforms continue to evolve and do so at a rapid pace (Afolabi, 2015). For example, there are many products that are directed at helping faculty members who teach online, but still want to have a face-to-face experience with their students via online lectures. One such tool is VoiceThread, which offers numerous ways of communicating based on the needs of both faculty members and students (Chicioreanu, 2010). Many online students expect interactivity and an experience that is as close to a “traditional” classroom-based education as possible (Schrum & Hong, 2002). Additional tools, such as Camtasia, Tegrity, Snagit, and Jing, all allow online faculty members to engage with students, help students to engage in the material, and maintain a “face-to-face” atmosphere. This might prove to be especially important for online doctoral students during their coursework as well as once they
finish their course work and transition to a doctoral candidate. At this point, candidates are more independent but still novices, in a less structured academic atmosphere, and likely many miles away from their mentor and peers. This might help to explain the high dropout rates for online doctoral students (Rogers & Fleck, 2014). More research is needed to examine these issues to offer more support to students and faculty members in online doctoral education.

As more university courses are offered, online faculty members have a lot to learn regarding how to use this technology to facilitate effective learning (Edwards, Perry, & Janzen, 2011). The growing scholarly literature, the information technology department, as well as peers who have undergone the transition of teaching face-to-face to completely online at the graduate and/or doctoral level are excellent resources. In sum, faculty members who are newly branching out to teach exclusively online need to make sure that they are not putting themselves in a silo. Feeling alone, without the support of faculty, can make something like a simple task seem overwhelming. However, by staying abreast of online pedagogies as well as keeping in constant contact with those who can help with the process (e.g., colleagues), the work at hand may no longer feel insurmountable.
References


Words of Wisdom Gathered during the Online Doctoral Student Journey

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Abstract

Although the journey to pursuing an online doctoral degree is unique for each student, reflections of success offered by those who completed the journey can be helpful both in normalizing certain experiences and in detailing strategies for success.

*Keywords:* online; doctoral student; dissertation; obstacles; support; success

I still remember when I started my online first graduate course. It would be 2,061 days until my dissertation oral defense. During that time, I made three critically significant discoveries about myself. These discoveries had little direct connection to my research, but proved to be monumental in my survival of the entire doctoral program and dissertation process. First, I discovered that I really did not know myself or my capabilities until I had gone through the fire, so to speak. Second, I realized the importance of keeping things in perspective. Finally, I found that this whole process of earning my doctoral degree online was not as much about me as I had initially thought. Armed with a constantly changing timeline that I posted next to my computer, I set out to climb this hill, which transformed into a mountain and became my quest.

Overcoming Obstacles and Finding Strength

Although the successful completion of my dissertation was important professionally and academically, the more significant personal outcome of my experience was a far better understanding of me. This personal understanding did not focus on my limitations, but it revealed my ability to achieve. Like many doctoral students, school was always easy for me and left me feeling academically unchallenged. However, this all changed after I completed my doctoral coursework and attempted the comprehensive
examination. This exam was the first academic task that I was not able to complete easily and with confidence. After several weeks of uncertainty and anxiety, I received the official letter from the university declaring my status as a doctoral candidate. Immediately, I scanned and uploaded the letter to my computer to make it my desktop background for the remainder of my doctoral journey. Its presence served as a constant reminder of how far I had come and how far I had to go.

Feeling accomplished, I transitioned to the dissertation process, which was exciting, yet equally challenging. My initial thoughts and ideas about my dissertation were replaced by new approaches and inquiries. As soon as I pondered one question, three other issues probed my mind, awaiting immediate responses. As these new questions emerged, my previously developed problem and purpose statements and methodology were no longer relevant. I was once again rethinking my entire approach. The scientific process could be a cunning, yet unpredictable animal.

In fact, there were occasions that I received feedback during my dissertation reviews that was emotionally difficult to accept. For example, sometimes the feedback included suggestions for an overwhelming number of changes. There were also times when I disagreed with the feedback, but believed that I could not challenge the revisions without repercussions. With each submission and subsequent resubmission, I held my breath, hoping that I had responded with the necessary corrections. After receiving feedback one time, the impact of those comments on my emotional psyche was just too painful for me to handle. Consequently, I packed all of my research into a box, apologized to my husband for spending all of this money, and announced that I was done! I was ready to quit.

Obviously, I did not quit. My husband was pivotal in supporting me through this difficult time. In addition to letting me vent to him, he helped with household duties, so I had more time to devote to my academics. I also found encouragement among my peers at the university. It was comforting to have others going through this same madness, as many of my family members and friends could not relate to my experiences of obtaining a doctoral degree online. The support that my family members, friends, and
others offered as I endured this process gave me the strength to resume my work. I discovered that I could sit at my computer, working late into the night when the rest of the world had gone to bed. I learned that I could read and understand volumes of information. I realized that I could synthesize multiple research findings into a single paragraph. Moreover, I never imagined that I could memorize so much about APA formatting, but I did. Furthermore, I certainly never anticipated how elated I would feel when the final committee member approved my dissertation manuscript. Needless to say, I was ecstatic! Eventually, I began to see things come together. My dissertation was accepted, allowing me to defend my work. As I reflect on this experience, it was surreal when I heard my chair congratulate me and address me as “Doctor.” Those were remarkable words to hear 2,061 days after this journey began.

The Anatomy of Brush Strokes: An Analogy To Remember

Writing a dissertation can be a ridiculously daunting task. However, an analogy about brush strokes that was shared with me in the middle of my journey helped me to keep my ordeal in perspective. Imagine a beautiful Impressionist painting, such as a Monet piece. From a distance, a beautiful, complete picture can be seen. Upon closer inspection, you begin to notice individual colors applied side-by-side, where assorted textures have developed through many varied layers of paint. Then, when you finally are standing directly in front of the painting, you see the small, thin, yet visible and well-defined individual brush strokes on the canvas, which in total form the painting. One of those brush strokes, I was told, symbolized my dissertation. On the one hand, it might suggest that an individual dissertation is insignificant. On the other hand, each brush stroke is equally important. Some stand out on top, whereas others offer the foundation upon which layers were built. Individually, some might appear more vibrant than others, and many are not even directly connected to one another. However, when you stand back to grasp the entire scene, the Monet piece emerges. In other words, your work is important; however, it is crucial that you not let the process of creating the work overwhelm you like I did. Remember, it is not your goal to paint the entire field of research on your own. Choose a
topic that you are passionate about because it will remain with you for a long time. Then, you must work hard to positively influence your field. Researchers before you have given you findings from which to build and further explore; others will follow you to complement your contribution. Eventually, all of our academic contributions merge to create a beautiful mosaic of inquiry and discovery.

**You Might Be Far Away, but You Are Not Alone**

Remember, the people giving their support, time, compassion, generosity, and wisdom to you because they are incredible. For a short time, as I mentioned earlier, I thought that I was alone in this process, but I was wrong. Recognize your supporters because they do exist. Use them and rely on them in whatever form they present. You might be located near one of the university’s physical locations or you might be miles away. However, they do exist; my family and I have seen them. The day before graduation, we drove to the university’s physical location and requested a tour. The energy and enthusiasm that radiated from the individuals in that building were contagious. There was activity everywhere, from those working in enrollments and in advising to administrators who were engaged in planning and conversation to the folks in the information technology department who were working hard on a new course room environment. Amid the hustle and bustle, every person there was working on my behalf, on your behalf, on our behalf. Do not forget that they exist to help you because they do!

Personally, there are so many wonderful people that I want to acknowledge for the support that they provided to me along my path to obtain my doctoral degree. My accomplishment is certainly not mine alone. First and foremost, my chair was with me for the long haul, which not all online doctoral students experience. Her patience, words of advice, and unwavering encouragement helped me to persevere through the highs and lows of this journey. My committee members’ comments and insights were always thoughtful and positive and undoubtedly helped me to improve my research and dissertation at each step. I also found support from other online doctoral students at the university. I would have never imagined such strong friendships could develop over the Internet, but they did! I think meeting all of them in person was one of the greatest benefits of this program. A few summers
ago, four of us met up for a couple days of relaxation, good food, and camaraderie. I believe that we will stay connected in some way. In addition, constant queries from my colleagues at work about the status of my dissertation also helped me to remain focused and to endure. I also have a wonderfully diverse and awesome circle of personal friends, some of whom actually read my dissertation! I encourage you to ask the same of your friends. Their inspirational words, inquiries about my progress, shared excitement, instant messages, Twitter replies, and "likes" of my periodic Facebook updates meant more than I could possibly convey.

Finally, my family believed in me all along and offered the greatest support. They never had to wonder about my whereabouts. The clicking of the keyboard gave away my location every time. Oftentimes, they tolerated poorly prepared meals, delayed laundry, untidy living space, and unattended piano concerts for my daughter, which I gave up to pursue my degree. Throughout my life, my family has always encouraged my passion for education, providing me with some of the brick-and-mortar tools that I needed to actively pursue my dreams. These attributes helped me to achieve this goal in a virtual environment! I have an amazing life. I have everything that I need and nearly everything I could ever want. I will certainly acknowledge that I put in my share of hard work, but I simply cannot ignore the efforts of so many individuals who helped me along the way. I hope that all online doctoral students will realize the strength that they possess within themselves and the wisdom that they can gain from others on their journey to becoming successful online doctoral graduates.