# WHAT DO ALLIES DO?: PROVIDING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE COUNSELING TO COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

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**ABSTRACT**

In the United States, the field of counseling has not kept pace with the changing ethnic demographics of larger society. As such, communities of color in the U.S. require the support of counselor allies. Allies are people from dominant socio-political groups who seek to end oppression. This study used grounded theory to examine the experience of six counselors who were identified as allies to communities of color. Based on the results of this study, we argue that allies possess self-awareness, personal knowledge of and connection to communities of color, and the skills of rapport building and engaging in critical conversations. They also participate in action on behalf of their students. Implications of these findings for counselor who seek to be allies to communities of color are provided.

**Keywords**:
aliados; asesoramiento multicultural; apoyo; privilegio

**RESUMEN**

En los Estados Unidos la profesión de consejería no ha seguido el ritmo de los cambios demográficos étnicos de la sociedad. Como tal, las comunidades de color en los Estados Unidos requieren el apoyo de consejero que son aliados. Los aliados son personas de grupos socio-políticas dominantes que buscan poner fin a la opresión. En este estudio se utilizó grounded theory para examinar la experiencia de seis consejeros que fueron identificados como aliados a las comunidades de color. Basándose en los resultados de este estudio, discutimos que los aliados tienen conocimiento de uno mismo, conocimiento personal de y la conexión a las comunidades de color, las habilidades de establecimiento de una relación y participan en conversaciones críticas, y participan en la acción en nombre de sus estudiantes.

**Keywords:**
allies; multicultural counseling; advocacy; privilege

¿QUÉ HACEN LOS ALIADOS ?: PROPORCIONANDO ASESORAMIENTO CULTURALMENTE RECEPTIVO A LAS COMUNIDADES DE COLOR

The Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC) transformed the counseling field. Multicultural counseling is now a requirement of counselor training, issues related to multiculturalism are part of the counseling code of ethics, and multicultural counseling is considered the fourth force in the counseling field (Pederson, 1990). Notwithstanding, the MCC were critiqued for their structure (Caldwell, Tarver, Iwamoto, Herzbeg, Cerda-Lizarraga, & Mack, 2008; Constantine & Ladany, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 2000), over-emphasizing race and advocacy (Collins & Arthur, 2010; Weinrach & Thomas; 2002), and lack of practical application (Collins & Arthur, 2010). This last point is particularly concerning as one would expect the MCC to guide best practice with communities of color (ethnic communities of non-European ancestry, including communities of African, Latina/o/x, Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern ancestry).

A related multicultural counseling concern is the reemergence of racism in the United States. Since the presidential election of 2016 there has been a dramatic increase in the number of hate incidences reported in the U.S., specifically racism targeting immigrants, African Americans, and Middle Easterners (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). In addition, it is believed that a record number of hate groups now exist in the U.S. (Love, 2017). Research has demonstrated that exposure to racism negatively impacts the mental health of communities of color (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012). Given the current sociopolitical climate, communities of color require mental health services from counselors who can be allies.

Unfortunately, the counseling profession has failed to keep pace with the ethnic diversity of the United States population. The US population is approximately 61.3% White/Non-Hispanic, 17.8% Latina/o/x, 13.3% African American, 5.7% Asian American, and 1.3% Native American (US Census Bureau, 2016). Alas, 83% of American Counseling Association members identify as White (American Counseling Association, 2015). Given the discrepancy between the counseling field and the general U.S. population, it is crucial that White counselors possess skills to effectively serve communities of color. However, are the MCC the most appropriate framework for White counselors to use in their work with communities of color?

To address the mental health needs of communities of color and the overrepresentation of White practitioners in the counseling field, we studied White counselors who were highly regarded by communities of color. In the context of this paper, we will refer to these practitioners as allies. Ally commonly refers to "members of dominant social groups (e.g., men, Whites, heterosexuals) who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership" (Broido, 2000, pg. 3). Using a grounded theory methodology and a constant comparative method of data analysis we sought to uncover the practices and dispositions used by allies in effectively serving communities of color. Finally, based on these findings, we will describe strategies allies might employ to best serve communities of color.

## Defining Multicultural Competence

The Multicultural Counseling Competencies were developed to address the limited attention given to issues of diversity and culture in counseling (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue, Arrendondo, & McDavis, 1992). Recently, the MCC were revised as the Multicultural Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC); the new MSJCC sought to address diversity in its broadest sense and the counselor's role in advocacy (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016). The MSJCC argued that counselors should possess awareness, knowledge, and skill and should engage in action to support clients from diverse communities (Ratts et al., 2016). We will briefly review the components of awareness, knowledge, skills, and action to provide the reader with background on the MSJCC. For a deeper exploration, the reader is referred to Arredondo et al. (1996), Ratts et al. (2016), and Sue et al. (1992).

Awareness refers to the counselor's recognition of self as a cultural being and the realization we are all a product of cultural conditioning (Holcomb-McCoy, 2000). Additionally, the counselor is called to acknowledge their unearned privilege and examine their personal biases (Grothaus, McAuliffe, & Craigen, 2012). This is done to avoid imposing one's values on the client and to limit the likelihood of misinterpreting the client's concerns. It is argued that awareness is an essential first step toward multicultural competence (Lee, 2013).

The second component of MSJCC is knowledge. Heppner (2006) described knowledge as a wide range of information about human behavior across cultures. Counselors require knowledge of the histories, customs, and lived experiences of diverse communities (Lee, 2013). Additionally, knowledge entails an understanding of cultural identity, the strengths the client derives from their culture, and knowledge of the sociopolitical realities facing culturally diverse communities (Grothaus et al., 2012; Lee, 2013). It is believed that the development of knowledge requires active participation with diverse communities through cultural events, readings, and multimedia (Arredondo et al., 1996; Grothaus et al., 2012; Hipolito-Delgado, Cook, Avrus, & Bonham, 2011).

Skill necessitates that a counselor successfully develops and implements interventions that are culturally appropriate; this requires a counselor to attune oneself to the cultural reality of the client (Sue et al., 1992). Understanding the client's cultural context allows the counselor to determine which interventions are appropriate in said context (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2011). To be culturally responsive, counselors are called upon to be eclectic (Lee, 2013) and to take on various roles, including advisor and facilitator of traditional healing.

Action, an addition to the MSJCC, describes specific steps counselors take to support culturally diverse clients (Ratts et al., 2016). Specifically, counselors are called to take on the role of advocate when restrictive systems inhibit the wellbeing of the client (Lee, 2013). At the action level, counselors address intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, public policy, and international barriers that might affect the client (Ratts et al., 2016).

## Critique of Multicultural Counseling Competencies

Although the MSJCC represent the most current thinking on multicultural competence, the newness of the MSJCC has not allowed sufficient time for literature to be published discussing the merits and weaknesses of the MSJCC. As such, we will focus this section on critiques of the MCC. The critiques of the MCCs ranged from disagreement with the notion of competence to the content of the MCC over-emphasizing race and advocacy. Additionally, the MCC are critiqued for the lack of practical suggestions, insufficient empirical evidence of their structure, and limited evidence that following the MCC leads to more culturally competent practice.

Aside from the actual contents of the MCCs, scholars took issue with the notion of "competence". Hipolito-Delgado (2014) noted that competence implied a minimum standard—the basics of what is needed to perform a given task. This point was recognized by the authors who operationalized the MCC: "In effect, these competencies are generic or baseline competencies essential to all counseling transactions" (Arredondo et al., 1996, p. 45). We feel that competence implies too low a threshold and agree with Hipolito-Delgado (2014) that effectively partnering and providing services to communities of color requires a higher standard of practice, which we hope to describe through the findings of this study.

Other critiques focused on the content of the MCC—specifically the emphasis on race and advocacy and perceived lack of practical application. Collins and Arthur (2010) argued that the MCC focused too narrowly on race, negating broader conceptions of culture, such as gender, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, socioeconomic status, and ability. What is more, Weinrach and Thomas (2002) noted that the original MCC did not explicitly incorporate considerations of ability, gender, age or sexual orientation. In fact, the authors of the MCC readily acknowledged that the MCC focused on race/ethnicity, specifically African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, and

Hispanics/Latinos (Sue et al., 1992). Further, the need for a broader consideration of diversity and culture was part of the charge for the committee that developed the MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2016). In addition to an overemphasis on race, Weinrach and Thomas (2002) argued that the MCCs gave excessive attention to advocacy. These authors stated that an emphasis on advocacy took counselors away from direct service to clients and there is a lack of evidence linking social change to improved functioning for clients (Weinrach & Thomas, 2002). Interestingly, the new MSJCC have an increased emphasis on advocacy and action. Finally, Collins and Arthur (2010) stated that the MCCs lacked practical applications, failed to provide direction on building rapport with clients, and did not describe specific strategies or interventions.

A final group of authors critiqued the MCCs for a lack of empirical support of its structure or outcomes. Caldwell, et al. (2008), Constantine and Ladany (2001), and Holcomb-McCoy (2000) raised doubts about the three-factor structure (awareness, knowledge, and skills) of the MCC. Using a sample of 99 frontline human service providers, Caldwell et al. (2008) identified a seven-factor structure for multicultural competence. Constantine and Ladany (2001) proposed six dimensions for multicultural competence. Holcomb-McCoy (2000) surveyed 151 professional counselors and identified five dimensions of multicultural competence. In addition to a lack of research for the three-factor structure of the MCC, the counseling literature is also devoid of evidence that counselors who mastered the MCC were more culturally responsive (Weinrach & Thomas, 2002). To address the limits regarding the MCC a study was conducted to (1) understand the practices and dispositions used by counselors who are allies to communities of color and (2) to identify strategies counselors might implement to effectively serve communities of color.

## Methods

### Ontology

In describing the nature of knowledge, Crotty (1998) stated: "meaning is not discovered, but constructed…people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon" (p. 9). Consistent with Crotty, the authors endorse a constructivist view of reality. As such, a qualitative approach to research was utilized in this study. Qualitative research seeks to provide a rich description of the experiences of the participants and allows the voices of participants to be heard (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2013).  Given the desire to honor the voice of the participants and identify the dispositions and strategies implemented by allies to communities of color, a qualitative approach was selected for this study.

### Grounded Theory

Researchers using grounded theory attempt to generate a theory to explain a process or action that is unexamined in the literature (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Due to the dearth of counseling literature regarding the disposition and practices of counselors who are allies to communities of color, a grounded theory methodology was deemed appropriate for this study. Grounded theory does not impose a predetermined hypothesis on participants; rather, theory is generated based on the voices and experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Given our desire to respect the voices of participants and ground our findings in their experience, the authors felt that grounded theory was most appropriate for this study. Furthermore, Fassinger (2005) advocated for the use of grounded theory in counseling research, noting that it integrated theory and practice better than any other research methodology.

### Positionality

Researchers utilizing qualitative methods are called to address their positionality, particularly their social identities, as they might influence the research process (Jones et al., 2006). The first author is a Chicano counselor educator in his late thirties of upper middle SES. His reason for pursuing this study stems from his research interest in promoting MSJCC and his employment in a counselor education program that serves predominantly White graduate students. He undertook this study hoping to identify dispositions and practices utilized by allies, so that he might teach these dispositions and practices to his graduate students. The second author identifies as a White counseling psychologist in her late twenties

from upper middle SES. Her interest in this study derives from being a White counselor and recognizing the importance of being an effective ally and enacting principles of social justice, both in her personal work as well as to better teach future counseling students.

**Setting**

This study took place in the Southwest region of the United States. Participants represented different educational institutions, including public high schools, community colleges, and four-year public universities.

**Recruitment**

To be consistent with the traditions of grounded theory, purposeful sampling was implemented in this study (Fassinger, 2005). Charmaz (2006) and Jones et al. (2006) stated that purposeful sampling seeks the recruitment of "information-rich" participants—those who can best describe the action or process under investigation. For the purposes of this study the researchers sought participants who self-identify as White, practiced or were training as counselors, and were considered allies to communities of color. To identify allies, the first author polled graduate students of color at a southwestern university; asking the students to identify White counselors who were highly regarded by communities of color—only those counselors who received 3 or more nominations were considered. Ten potential participants were identified and 8 agreed to participate in this study. After the sixth interview, the first author felt saturation was reached, as no new data or concepts were uncovered and sufficient information existed to develop a theory (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2013). Thus, no further interviews were conducted. No incentives were provided for participants in this study. This study was approved by and complied with the regulations of the Institutional Review Board at the university of the first author.

**Participants**

Six White counselors participated in this study and all provided written informed consent. At the time of the study, two participants were high school counselors, two were graduate counseling students, one was a community college counselor, and one was retired. Participants ranged in age from late twenties to mid-sixties and their experience in counseling ranged from 5 years to 30 years. Five participants identified as female and one identified as male. These participants worked in communities that were primarily African American and Latina/o/x. To protect the identities of the participants, pseudonyms were used.

**Data Collection**

The first author and three graduate students conducted data collection. The graduate students identified as heterosexual, females, in their early thirties, of middle socioeconomic status. One graduate student identified as African American, another as Mexican American and the last as White. Consistent with grounded theory methodology, data collection was done via audio-recorded, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (Birks & Mills, 2011). The first author and graduate students developed an interview protocol consisting of eight questions that sought to obtain information on how participants defined the notion of ally, how they came to be allies, and the types of dispositions and practices they possessed as allies. Interview questions included: what does it mean to be an ally to communities of color, what influenced you to work with communities of color, and describe your strategies in working with communities of color. Interviews ranged in length from 45 to 60 minutes and recordings were transcribed for data analysis purposes.

**Data Analysis**

A constant comparative method of data analysis, consistent with grounded theory tradition (Birks & Mills, 2011; Fassinger, 2005; Jones et al., 2006), was implemented in this study. The constant comparative method of data analysis was selected as it is structured—consisting of open, axial, and selective coding—and provides a "trail of evidence" to support any conclusions drawn from the data (Jones et al., 2006). The authors approached data analysis in an inductive fashion seeking to derive a theory based on participants' experiences—as opposed to imposing a theory upon the participants. During the open coding process, the authors conducted line-by-line readings of the transcribed interviews—this was done to achieve a more nuanced understanding of our dense data, as is recommended by Charmaz (2006). The authors coded the first interview as a team. The second interview was read and coded independently; then the authors compared codes to assure consistency. Following this process, the authors felt they had achieved consistency and independently read and coded the remaining four interviews. At the end of this process a total of 68 codes were identified across all participants. These coded segments of data ranged in length from a couple of sentences to a paragraph. The participants own words were used to develop the names of codes. Example of codes included advocacy for higher education, discussing diversity, and awareness of privilege.

During axial coding the authors worked collaboratively to combine similar codes within each participant and then between participants. Codes that were deemed unrelated to this study were deleted. Following this process seven codes remained, including awareness of privilege and inequities, critical conversations, and understanding the community.

During selective coding, the authors collectively sought to identify the core criteria of the dispositions and practices used by counselors who are allies to communities of color. To this end the authors further consolidated similar codes and the second author noted that the remaining five codes mapped directly onto the MSJCC framework of awareness, knowledge, skill, and action (AKSA)—one code for each of the areas of awareness, knowledge, and action and two codes for skill. The authors emphasize that we did not use the MSJCC as a framework for data analysis—rather, the comparison of our findings to the MSJCC was done only after data analysis was completed. Based on our findings, we theorize that allies (1) possess self-awareness (specifically of privilege), (2) possess knowledge of communities of color, (3) possess skills in building rapport and engaging in critical conversations, and (4) engage in action by advocating for their students.

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research trustworthiness describes the authenticity and consistency of interpretations (Creswell, 2013; Yeh & Inman, 2007). There are numerous methods for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research; the authors utilized reflective journaling and an external auditor to ensure the accuracy of their interpretations. Throughout the research process the authors wrote reflective journals—these journals described the authors assumptions about the data and documented important decisions. The process of reflective journaling allowed the authors to check their assumptions and kept author bias from entering data analysis. Additionally, an outside researcher, who is familiar with qualitative research, conducted a thorough review of the data and conclusions from this study. The outside researcher felt that the results of the study were tenable but did not agree with the usage of an external framework, in this case the MSJCC, for presenting the results, as it is inconsistent with grounded theory tradition. Since, the MSJCC were not utilized until the final step of the data analysis, the authors felt they respected the inductive nature of grounded theory and were only using the MSJCC to organize results.

## Results

Based on the findings of this study we theorize that allies (1) possess self-awareness of privilege, (2) possess knowledge of communities of color, (3) possess skills in building rapport and engaging in critical conversations, and (4) engage in action by advocating for their students. Further, these findings

are in direct alignment with the MSJCC—again we note that the MSJCC were not used as a framework for data analysis.

## Awareness

The theme of awareness was identified as crucial to forming relationships with communities of color. This theme included identifying the role that privilege has played in the counselor's life, as well as an awareness of how privilege has impacted both the counselor's personal development and the counselor's work with communities of color. John, a school counseling student at the time of the study, described how working with communities of color requires allies to possess awareness of their privileges and resist imposing personal values on communities of color:

> as a white male…I want to treat all students fairly, equally, and I want all students to have the same opportunities as each other, but just be aware of the walls that are kinda up there...You can't just be naïve to think that students or parents are going to react to you the same way. They are going to react to you in different ways and there are reasons why that is.

If John did not recognize his privilege, he would not understand why students and communities of color react to him differently than do White students and families. John's awareness of his privilege allows him to understand that he will need to prove himself as an ally if he is to serve communities of color.

To connect with students and accurately understand the dynamics of the community, allies must be aware of how they have benefited from systems of oppression. Katherine, a professional school counselor, stated:

> I finally got that even though my family was poor, and my mom had been oppressed for being a woman, and I lived in a poor community that lacked resources...I still had certain privileges just because I am White...this inspired me to advocate for others because I didn't think it was ok that I had an "advantage" over others when I hadn't worked for it. The more I learned about policies and systems that had been set up that inherently discriminate against people of color...the more I felt a need to change these policies and systems.

For Katherine, the awareness of privilege was a catalyst inspiring her to learn more about and advocate on behalf of students of color. Counselors in this study underscored the importance of awareness as a basis for being an ally to communities of color.

## Knowledge

As well as knowing themselves, counselors identified personal connections and knowledge of the community as an important aspect of being an ally. The type of knowledge described by allies went beyond book learning in a multicultural counseling classroom. Allies were actively involved with communities of color and had personal relationships with members of the community. Attending community events was identified as an important strategy in gaining knowledge about the community, as John stated:

> just getting involved, just hanging out with the families…Hanging out in the parks, they have these fundraisers some nights to support some church that somebody's cousin or aunt goes to, but just being a part of hanging out with the community… just livin' life with them.

Jean, a retired counselor, echoed John's sentiments; indicating that learning from the community is an important part of being an ally communities of color. Jean emphasized the importance of appreciating the diversity within communities of color:

> humility is an ingredient that is nonnegotiable. I have been very humbled to learn from communities of color. I need to listen, especially as a White person…there is diversity among Black folk; there is diversity among Latinos and others. There isn't one voice.

Knowing communities of color and being an active participant allowed allies to work more closely with and gain the respect and trust of the community. This ultimately led to being more effective counselors and advocates for communities of color.

## Skills

The counselors in this study identified a range of skills necessary to be an ally to communities of color, from basic skills, such as building rapport, to more advanced skills, such as engaging in critical conversations about racial and social inequalities. Shannon, a community college counselor, shared the importance of building rapport with her students:

> I [try] to provide a safe space where students can come with any concerns and know that I will answer their questions without judgment. They will not leave my office feeling like I think they are stupid. Instead they will leave my office with a better understanding of the higher education system, a plan of attack to reach their goals and an invitation to return if they have any questions or concerns. I definitely believe in challenging students but making sure that I help to support them in the process of getting a higher level of education.

Strong, supportive relationships are the basis of Shannon's work with students. Once she has the trust of her students, Shannon can foster higher educational aspirations in her students.

Another skill allies identified as important to working with communities of color was engaging in critical conversations. Jean discussed the importance of addressing and combating stereotypes:

> I think it's not being afraid to stand up and take (a) stand. When you're in a group of people and they're saying negative things about people of color, speak up. Your silence is complicit and I have a responsibility to be respectful but to speak up. And I've learned I've practiced these types of things because sometimes you're caught off guard because you think Oh…they think because I'm White I think like they do, so I've had to find ways to say things. You know, I really find that offensive or I'm uncomfortable with that remark.

Engaging in critical conversations can be a difficult skill, as Jean expressed, due to the balance needed between challenging someone on their statements and being respectful at the same time. This skill is crucial to being an effective ally because it can challenge others to rethink their assumptions about students of color and their own role in discriminatory practices.

## Action

Engaging in action is also another aspect of being an ally to communities of color. For the counselors in this study action typically took the form of advocating on behalf of their students. Advocacy is particularly important in education systems, as a lack of access to information is one of many barriers that students face in trying to move forward in their educational goals. Shannon discussed the importance of advocacy to her work:

> I understand that many of the students are the first in their families to attend college so I want to work with them, guide them, teach them the vocabulary necessary to succeed and get to the same starting point as a student whose family went to college. I know I was incredibly lucky that my mom forced me to fill out the application to college...Many people don't have parents with that knowhow and it shouldn't keep them from getting a better life through education.

Awareness of the systemic barriers and having a strong relationship with students allows Shannon to engage in advocacy within the community and address important information gaps.

The importance of advocacy for the work of allies was also supported by Jean. Here Jean describes the need for counselors to know the systems in which they work and how to navigate systems to meet student needs:

> And the bureaucracy is there with rules and regs and some of them you have to break, and some of them you just have to be smart about it and try to change some of those rules and influence them on behalf of students. And your job is not to be a gatekeeper, your job is to be an advocate and advocacy means…I just don't accept no, I just don't.

Aside from describing the importance of advocacy for supporting students, Jean describes, in no uncertain terms, that allies are advocates—a point that she conveyed very passionately. Further, Jean argues that

allies do not take no for an answer, they do what it takes to support their students—even if this means breaking institutional policy. Though we are not advocating that counselors disobey institutional policy or break the law, we think that Jean's passion demonstrates that allies take bold action to support their students.

## Discussion

Numerous critiques abound regarding the MCC. These critiques included the lack of empirical support for the MCC structure and the overemphasis of race and advocacy. Though the MSJCC attempted to address some of these concerns, the participants in this study described dispositions and practice that appear to address most of these critiques.

Various authors raised concerns over the lack of empirical evidence to support the structure of the MCCs (Caldwell et al., 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2000; Weinrach & Thomas, 2002). The dispositions and practices described by participants in this study aligned with the structure of AKSA in the MSJCC. Again, we note that the MSJCCs were not used as a theoretical framework for data analysis; it was not until selective coding was completed that the second author noted our core criteria directly mapped onto the framework of AKSA. Although Caldwell et al. (2008), Constantine and Ladany (2001), and Holcomb-McCoy (2000) have argued for seven, six, and five factor structures (respectively), the findings of this study are in alignment with the four-factor structure (AKSA) of the MSJCC.

Lee (2013) noted that the skill domain is often frustrating for counselors who expect explicit counseling interventions to be provided. Collins and Arthur (2010) further critiqued the MCC for a lack of practical application. However, the participants in this study described concrete applications in the areas of AKSA. In the skills domain, the participants in this study discussed the importance of taking time to build rapport and engaging in critical conversations to challenge stereotypes. In the action domain, the participants in this study described engaging in advocacy to ensure educational opportunity.

Authors critiqued the MCCs for focusing exclusively on race and neglecting a broader definition of culture, that includes consideration of gender, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, socioeconomic status, and ability (Collins & Arthur, 2010; Weinrach & Thomas, 2002). Due to the nature of our research question (what are the dispositions and practices implemented by allies of communities of color), our participants also focused heavily on race and ethnicity. Although a few participants did raise issues of gender and SES, the bulk of interventions discussed were intended for students of color. As such, the authors are not able to address this specific critique.

Weinrach and Thomas (2002) argued that the MCCs overemphasize advocacy. Our participants uniformly endorsed the importance of advocacy when working with communities of color. Specifically, Shannon addressed the importance of advocacy for educational opportunity. Similarly, Katherine and Zoe discussed how knowledge of social inequalities inspired them to act on behalf of students of color. It should be noted that all the participants in this study held education related positions; as such it is possible that the importance of advocacy to being an ally to communities of color is exclusive to education related specialties of counseling. Though the participants appear to disagree with the critique of Weinrach and Tomas (2002), the importance of advocacy does align with the MSJCC.

## Implications

The participants in this study described the dispositions and skills used by allies and provide possibilities on how MSJCC are operationalized by counselors who work with communities of color. We believe that these findings can serve practitioners as a framework for providing counseling services to communities of color.

Participants in this study described how self-awareness served as a basis for learning more about and advocating for communities of color. Although the importance of awareness has been stated (Lee,

2013), the results of this study provide examples of how the awareness is used as well as how it is gained. Participants identified things such as multicultural courses as integral in starting their journey towards self-awareness, but also identified immersion into the community as another tool for gaining awareness. Counselors who are allies to communities of color are likely able to recognize their privilege without being paralyzed by white guilt and are likely able to use this recognition as motivation for advocacy within and on behalf of the community. Based on this finding, we recommend that counselors and counselors in training devote additional time to acknowledging and exploring their unearned privilege.

Engaging with the community and having personal relationships with its members is a way participants in this study gained deeper knowledge of communities of color—beyond the textbook learning available in most multicultural counseling courses. Participants in this study shared that going to community events, living in the community, and meeting students and families where they live are ways of developing a more personal knowledge of the community. Having this knowledge also allowed allies in this study to nurture counseling relationships and utilize culturally relevant interventions that are based on their shared experiences and commonalities with community members.

Participants identified a range of skills from basic counseling skills, such as building rapport, to more advanced skills, such as critical conversations, that are necessary for being an ally to communities of color. Gaining the respect of communities that have been taken advantage of in the past or have been provided misinformation, can be a long and frustrating process for some counselors; in this study, allies recognized this challenge and demonstrated their commitment and care for communities of color. Based on the findings of this study we encourage counselors working with communities of color to take the time to get to know these communities and actively demonstrate their commitment to communities of color. More advanced skills such as challenging stereotypes and engaging in critical conversations are critical for being an ally to communities of color—particularly considering the many systemic barriers that communities of color face. Counselors in this study highlighted the importance of challenging stereotypes through critical conversations with peers and other professionals. These skills are paramount to being an effective ally and highlight the importance of noticing discrimination or inequalities and challenging them.

Considering the many systemic barriers that communities of color face, the participants in this study described the importance of being an advocate. Participants specifically discussed the need to know institutional policy, share information with the community, and challenge institutional barriers. Though we do not endorse breaking institutional policy, as Jean described, allies should seek to understand their agencies and larger social policies to identify potential barriers and develop strategies to navigate or change discriminatory policies. Further, it is wise to share strategies for navigating social institutions with communities of color in order foster empowerment and reduce dependency on the counselor. The willingness to be an advocate and support communities of color was a hallmark of the allies who participated in this study.

## Limitations and Future Research

There are two major limitations to this research study: the participants and the need for more rigorous trustworthiness measures. As noted above, potential participants were identified by polling graduate students. Although we attempted to ensure the quality of participants by requiring a minimum of three student endorsements per participant, the researchers are unable to conclusively demonstrate that participants in this study possessed superior MSJCC—only that these allies were highly regarded in communities of color. Additionally, all participants in this study were counselors in educational settings, either K-12 or higher education. As such, the findings of this study might not be applicable for counselors working in other specialty areas. Therefore, future research might focus on the practices of allies to communities of color in non-education counseling specialties.

Additionally, the authors would have liked to implement more measures to ensure trustworthiness. Unfortunately, a gap of approximately 2 years existed between the collection of data and the termination of data analysis. During this time, the first author lost contact with most of the

participants, making it impossible to conduct member checks. Member checking would have allowed the authors to consult participants regarding the findings and allowed participants to provide additional feedback. In addition, the authors would have liked to invite an outside researcher to investigate the findings of this study earlier in the process. Lack of funding limited the participation of the outside researcher until the end of the data analysis process.

Further research is needed to improve understanding of the practices of allies. Although the use of grounded theory was justified in this study, given the lack of empirical research and the need to provide greater depth of practices and dispositions utilized by allies of communities of color, more detailed research methodology is necessary. Further, there is a need for additional research to uncover best practices in multicultural counseling education and training, as this research would be useful in expanding the number of counselors capable of providing culturally relevant services to communities of color.

## Conclusion

Although preliminary, the findings of this study support the construction of the MSJCC; specifically, the current four-factor structure of the MSJCC and the importance of advocacy. Further, based on the findings of this study we argue that allies to communities of color possess self-awareness (specifically of privilege), possess knowledge of communities of color, possess skills in building rapport and engaging in critical conversations, and engage in advocacy. Though additional research is necessary to validate these findings, we hope this article will provide counselors with concrete ideas on how to be allies to communities of color.

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