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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Broaching Client Identities: Integrating a Critical Consciousness Lens in Counselling Practice

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Abstract
Cultural competence and, to a lesser extent, cultural safety for developing culturally responsive practice have been the dominant paradigms in the helping professions in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article focuses on a paradigm shift toward critical and structural consciousness in a masters-level counselling curriculum. Authors in this study undertook a qualitative inquiry in exploring counselling students' experiences of a critically conscious curriculum, culminating in their application of the skill of broaching as a strategy for discussing client intersectional identities and structural and systemic issues. The students described experiences of discomfort, challenge, and transformative learning. Unique and nuanced challenges of learning broaching are delineated by the students. Findings suggest that learners must have complex understandings of critically conscious concepts and local dominant norms to effectively explore intersectional and marginalised identities with clients. Direction for educators and supervisors in ways to anticipate common challenges and to better train and supervise beginning counsellors in broaching are included.

Keywords Broaching · Culturally responsive practice · Critical consciousness · Multicultural skills · Transformative learning

Aotearoa is the Māori (indigenous) name for New Zealand. Māori is an official language and 'Aotearoa' is commonly used alongside 'New Zealand'

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There is growing research evidence, and broad counselling profession support, for client benefit from counsellor broaching of cultural identities and associated contextual/structural dimensions (King, 2021; Zhang & Burkard, 2008). Despite this, student counsellors reported uncertainty and hesitancy about how to approach broaching conversations, even when they report gains in multicultural counselling attitudes and knowledge through exposure to this instructional content (Collins et al., 2015; Jones & Welfare, 2017). Myriad factors were found to contribute to this hesitancy, including the counsellor's own identities, their positionality and worldview in relation to the centrality of culture and power in daily life, fear of being offensive, and experience and education around broaching, intersectionality and cultural responsiveness (Day-Vines et al., 2018; King & Summers, 2020). In this study we explore the educational experiences of masters-level counselling students in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, following the introduction of a Critical Consciousness (CC) curriculum, culminating in practical broaching experiences of actual client intersectional identities. Focus on student educational experience may highlight the potential translation of a curriculum (CC and broaching) from the North American to the Aotearoa New Zealand context, where a predominant emphasis on bi- and multicultural competency persists. Specifically, we were interested to explore if, or how, a CC course curriculum impacts student learning and practice as a student counsellor, specific to thinking and acting more critically regarding their work with clients of differing identities and life experiences.

Counsellor Broaching

A growing body of research emanating from the North American context identified the effects of counsellor broaching as a strategy for actively addressing client identities, such as race, religion, gender or sexual orientation, in the context of structural and systemic issues, such as racism, sexism, ableism and homophobia, as relevant to client concerns (Day-Vines et al., 2021; King, 2021; King & Borders, 2019). The practice of broaching offers a potentially meaningful way of engagement with socio-cultural and -political realities in therapeutic practice (Day-Vines et al., 2013, 2021; King, 2021; King & Borders, 2019: see p. 343 for examples of broaching statements).

As a behaviourally defined skill, broaching refers to the counsellor's authentic, ongoing and meaningful consideration of relevant cultural factors in session, often as a direct invitation to discuss issues of identity and power with the client (Day-Vines et al., 2007). Five core tenets of broaching were proposed and agreed upon by scholars, including "broaching being (a) a counselor responsibility and (b) an ongoing process that (c) addresses dynamic identities, (d) conceptualizes identity on multiple levels (both individual and systemic), and (e) adopts a flexible stance" (King, 2021, p. 89–90). These foundational tenets require complex, yet not undebated, practices, with the ultimate aim of promoting client empowerment, coping, problem solving, resilience, and more effective functioning (King, 2021).

The benefit of broaching has strong support in the research literature. There are, for example, established empirical relationships between broaching and

strengthening rapport, increasing counsellor credibility, and client continuation and satisfaction with services (Fuertes et al., 2002; Knox et al., 2003; Zhang & Burkard, 2008). However, the more complex intricacies of best practice within counselling relationship dynamics is less clear. While four central broaching components for counsellors to attend to are relatively well supported, how to operationalise each component remains under scrutiny. Debated components include broaching timing as pro-active or responsive, use of direct or indirect language, goals of broaching for relationship or for content and broaching counsellor-client identity similarities and/or differences (King,2021; King & Borders, 2019). In addition, researchers who have taken into account the different identities of the counsellor and client, including the perspective of those with marginalised identities, encountered contradictory findings. For example, clients rated their counsellors as more credible and the therapeutic relationship as stronger, when White counsellors broached race with Black clients (Zhang & Burkard, 2008). However, King and Borders (2019) suggested, as these results were not consistent for Black counsellors broaching race with White clients, these broaching conversations "are more meaningful, maybe more clinically relevant, in dyads in which the client is a racial/ethnic minority and race is perhaps more salient to her or his overall identity" (p. 342).

Despite the promise of this intervention, counsellors in general and White counsellors in particular employ broaching at low rates and express hesitance about how exactly to approach these conversations (Jones & Welfare, 2017; Maxie et al., 2006). These topics, often deemed as taboo or difficult to broach, can result in practitioners minimizing, avoiding or denying the importance of such realities. In turn, counsellor refusal to broach was experienced by clients as a micro-aggressive act (Hook et al., 2016) and led to client dissatisfaction and premature departure from treatment (Day-Vines et al., 2013), reinforcing the need for practitioners to more effectively engage with diverse client identities, and issues of marginalisation and oppression, in therapeutic contexts.

King and Summers (2020) suggested that further research is needed to explore these factors, such as how racial colour blind attitudes predict variation in broaching or how training and experience contribute to one's ability to broach. King and Summers suggested those with more experience addressing identity and power are more likely to demonstrate comfort and competence in such broaching encounters. Additionally, broaching was described as representing "a whole stance or way of approaching injustice in the world" (King, 2021, p. 88), making the translation of course experience into actionable skills for student counsellors uncertain and challenging.

Added to this complexity, Day-Vines et al. (2007, 2020) suggested effective broaching is an ongoing process, requiring counsellors to attend to broaching requirements throughout sessions as relevant and meaningful. Counsellors should consider initiating, anticipating and responding to systemic forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism and other oppressions within and outside of the counselling session, validating the impacts of oppression on client's lives, and opening up safe spaces for ongoing dialogue around these events. Such conversations require counsellor flexibility, attentiveness and openness. Counsellors should be equipped, especially when they do not have shared experience, to follow the client's lead in relation

to both content and pacing of the conversations (King, 2021). However, counsellor trainees reported uncertainty about how to translate course curriculum around such topics into actionable skills.

Culturally Responsive Practice in Aotearoa New Zealand

As noted, broaching as culturally responsive practice has emerged in the North American context. In the health and helping professions in Aotearoa New Zealand, culturally responsive practice focused in the first instance on Māori and Māori culture, given their indigenous status and the health and social disparities they have and continue to experience as a result of European colonisation. Teaching Māori culture, practices and beliefs and enacting 'biculturalism,' as culturally competent practices, were the primary responses to what was perceived to be the key problematic of monoculturalism (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2019). However, this culturalist/ethnic approach leaves the colonial systems and structures responsible for the creation and perpetuation of ethnic inequities unexamined (Huygens, 2007; Paul et al., 2014).

Prompted by this significant shortcoming, nurse educators developed cultural safety for the nursing curriculum. Culture was now broadened out to encompass "a particular way of living in the world, attitudes, behaviours, links and relationships with others" (Papps & Ramsden, 1996, p. 493) including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, class and so on. Importantly, cultural safety incorporated critical self-reflection and power analyses, supporting an examination of dominant culture as well as that of 'others.'

In contrast, the New Zealand Medical Council adopted cultural competency as a proscribed practice (Durie, 2001, p. 3), which has since been heavily critiqued for reinforcing power imbalances through promoting transcultural mastery, and 'othering' clients for their 'differentness.' On this basis, Māori medical practitioner scholars called for the replacement of cultural competence as a framework with cultural safety, given it is "more fit for purpose in achieving health equity" (Curtis et al., 2019, p. 1 of 17).

Recognising the complementary but distinct aspects of cultural safety and cultural competence, the psychology and counselling professions in Aotearoa New Zealand reference *both* in their professional guidelines and codes of conduct, underpinned by a broad conceptualisation of culture. The notion of competence is foregrounded however, around awareness, knowledge and skills (Paul et al., 2014). The New Zealand Psychologists Board (2003, p. 3) notes cultural safety specifically, in terms of how a person, family or group experiences effective psychological education and practice, whereas associated concepts are more generally alluded to in the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (2020) Code of Ethics (for example, respecting diversity, promoting social justice, taking account of own identity and biases, addressing inequity and seeking to empower clients).

Although the intent to take heed of client 'culture' in the clinical/therapeutic encounter in order to optimise health outcomes is at the centre of both cultural safety and cultural competency, there are clear differences in approach between cultural safety versus cultural competency (see Table 1) (e.g. Curtis et al., 2019; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

Table 1 Key distinctions between cultural competence and cultural safety

Pole	Cultural competence	Cultural safety
Position of practitioner	Centred subject	Decentred subject - culturally safe practice is determined by the client
	Expertise/mastery - acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes	Critical self-reflection, cultural humility
Conceptualisation of culture	Essentialising, stereotypes, transcultural checklists Culture as property of 'others'	Broadly defined to encompass race, ethnicity, gender, religion, class et cetera
Treatment of power/structure	Individual analyses rather than discussion of systems and structures, power	Analyses of power, control and oppression at systemic level and within clinician-client relationship.
Focus/orientation	Examination of 'others'	Examination of dominant culture

Cultural competence is underpinned by an orientation that might be best described as 'naturalised dominance' or "Pākehā[1] as the norm" (Barnes et al., 2012, p. 197). In critical race studies, this dominance orientation is described as 'whiteness,' with roots in the global project of colonisation, comprised of several key features (Harris et al., 2017). First, in settler and other colonised societies, white understandings and practices are centred and taken for granted as universal and normal, and therefore rarely face critical examination or interrogation. White subjects are likely to feel a sense of culturelessness and racelessness, such traits ascribed largely as the properties of different others. This in turn leads to white persons exhibiting lower degrees of self-awareness about race and personal racial identity as compared to members of other racial-ethnic groups, including lack of awareness of privilege (Doane, 2003). Where one's whiteness is reproduced in social systems and structures, challenges to whiteness can therefore unsettle not only one's place in the world, but one's world. As a result, white subjects are less likely to have experienced, and may therefore have an aversion to, ontological discomfort or challenge.

Whiteness is just one example of naturalised, and inevitably invisibilised, dominance, most often associated with both cultural competence and cultural safety. Other forms include patriarchy, cisheteronormativity, and able-bodiedness. We posit that naturalised dominance is a reason for cultural competence's significant enduring appeal; naturalised dominance is a place of relative comfort for dominant culture learners, who can develop further 'competence' learning about 'others' while dominant culture remains unproblematized. Indeed, 'competence' is often even measured by learner comfort and confidence, with little consideration given to effectiveness in working across difference (Beagan, 2018).

A naturalised dominance frame means that in relation to cultural competence, cultural safety, and even cultural humility, the term 'culture' is likely to be read in a particular way, attributed to problematically different others (e.g., those with non-dominant identities), thereby producing an 'othering' response. This issue persists despite it being clear that the problems facing non-dominant group members are not only 'cultural,' but also structural, systemic and institutionalised. In this sense, structural consciousness and critical consciousness are terms and concepts marking a welcome and important paradigmatic shift. However, for the reasons outlined above, these new paradigms can be challenging to dominant culture learners.

Critical Consciousness

In addition to these limitations of a cultural competency or safety frame, scholars have critiqued the helping professions for decades for failing to recognize the presence and impact of structural oppression such as classism, cisheterosexism, and ethnic discrimination, as it impacts clients and the counselling process (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; Smith, 2017; Vera & Speight, 2003). Adherence to individualising

[1] This is a Māori-language term for 'white' inhabitants or those New Zealanders primarily of European descent.

conceptualizations of clients and their presenting symptoms, contemporary emphases on individual resilience along with a proliferation of depoliticized practices obfuscate recognition of the many ways dominant cultural norms and institutional practices premised on those norms can enact client oppression and, as a result, distress (Johnstone et al., 2019; Smith, 2017).

In turn, scholars suggested the need for more critically conscious counsellor preparation, to promote ethical and contextually relevant client services (Malott et al., 2023a; Pitner & Sakamoto, 2018; Shin, 2016; Shin et al., 2018). A critically conscious (CC) framework originates with Paolo Freire's (2000), suggesting use of pedagogy as a means to promote liberation. Freire asserted that teaching others to develop a *critical consciousness* - critically inquiring about oppressive systems, and taking action against power-over relationships and systems - can aid in redressing oppressive environments.

A focus on developing counsellor critical consciousness (Shin et al., 2018) is essential to allow counsellors to more effectively understand and intervene in the inequality and discrimination experienced by clients with marginalised identities, such as women, disabled people, members of the LGBTQIA + and indigenous communities. As applied to the practice of counselling, practitioner training through a critical lens could aid counsellor ability to avoid enacting or enforcing a harmful power-over relationship, as well as to suggest skills in deconstructing and decolonising harmful counselling theories, diagnosis, workplace policies and practices, and interventions (Malott et al., 2023a; Shin et al., 2016).

Beyond external systems of inequity, internalized forms of privilege and oppression can manifest in both the counsellor and client, resulting in a sense of either superiority or inferiority based on one's social standing (Pyke, 2010). Hence, the process of critically conscious counselling entails recognizing when issues of privilege and oppression are manifesting in the counselling session. Recognition would then allow raising client awareness of the internalization of such harmful narratives by naming and processing them within the counsellor-client dyad.

For counsellor educators, a CC curriculum can be used to promote practitioner reflexivity in regard to the many socio-political forces impacting client mental health, as well as to understand how such factors impact client case conceptualization and intervention decision making (Shin, 2016). In turn, CC instruction calls for counsellor examination of the impacts of inequitable, power-over structures (from poverty, to discrimination, to poor mental and psychological health), and understanding ways that the counsellor's own intersecting identities can reinscribe experiences of power and oppression in the counselling room. Such a critically conscious understanding is a necessary prerequisite for enacting meaningful and therapeutic broaching conversations.

A CC perspective necessitates an intersectional stance. Clients with a mixture of privileged and oppressed identities are understood as uniquely impacted by complex and intersecting experiences of power and oppression (Azzopardi, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989) . For instance, a person who benefits from being White and wealthy can simultaneously experience multiple layers of oppression due to being gay, a woman, and a wheelchair user. In turn, understanding client intersectional experiences requires that counsellors understand their own multiple and complex identities, and that they

are comfortable broaching and exploring clients' varying identities and how they are shaped by their treatment in society in relation to those identities (Kivlighan et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2020). Thus, the emphasis is placed not on individuals, but on the ways power operates structurally and systemically, to both privilege and marginalise particular bodies.

Thus, the aim of this research study was to assess if, or how, a CC course curriculum impacts student learning and broaching practice as a student counsellor, specific to thinking and acting more critically regarding their work with clients of differing identities and life experiences. Although this research particularly considers this in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, building on a historical cultural competence emphasis, we believe it has relevance for all contemporary counselling encounters and practitioners, particularly given the identified barriers to social justice learning and implementation (Malott et al., 2023b). The overarching study research question was 'What are the experiences of counselling students (positives, challenges, tensions, complexities) in engaging with a CC counsellor education curriculum, in class and in counselling practice?' However, reported findings focus on counsellor-client experience more specifically related to broaching.

Methods

The researchers in this study applied an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) in the study design and analysis process (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). A qualitative approach with a phenomenological focus upon interpretation, IPA may be used to make meaning of the way phenomena are understood, to identify and illustrate "patterns of meaning" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 104), or themes, as they emerge across data, through an epistemology that renders participant experiences as central (Smith & Osborne, 2015).

IPA's *hermeneutic phenomenological epistemology* addresses how a person relates to the world through meanings made of that world, recognizing that those meanings are uniquely shaped by one's "linguistic, relational, cultural and physical" context (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 102). IPA's *idiographic* approach allows researchers to focus in detail upon participant's particular world and lived experience, to deepen knowledge of that individual's experience with a particular phenomenon, and to "give voice" to that participant in regard to that phenomenon (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 101). IPA lends itself well to research in counselling-related fields, as the concept of voice and personal meaning making that is contextually shaped aligns with the practice of counselling itself (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Researcher Positionalities

Given the interpretive lens and the focus on CC, ongoing consideration of the positionalities of the researchers in relation to the data collection and analysis was crucial in undertaking this research. While space does not allow for a detailed discussion here, significant identities of the researchers include one indigenous Māori,

public health academic, one white North American counsellor educator and one Pākehā New Zealander counsellor educator. All three are able-bodied, cis-hetero-female, academics. Additionally, of the two counsellor educator academics, one brought significant experience implementing a social justice curriculum in her North American counsellor education context. Many conversations were held about assumptions, biases, and the translation to the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

Intervention

To increase student-counsellors' abilities to effectively work with a diversity of clients in their future counselling settings, a curriculum was developed by the three authors for a one-day portion of a post-graduate counselling course. Author two was on a visiting teaching fellowship with the School of Health Sciences, home of the Master of Counselling programme, at the time. Key aspects of the curriculum included a focus on (a) Dominant norms and their relationships to power structures; (b) Intersectionality: counsellor and client, myriad identities and their connection to power (oppression/privilege) within structures/systems, and; (c) Broaching: as a means for practicing cultural humility and identifying identity-related strengths (Day-Vines et al., 2013, 2021).

The day long curriculum was delivered through discussions, verbal and written reflections regarding student identities, videos, critical assessments of students current counselling organizations, case studies regarding counselling diverse populations, role plays, verbal and written reflection, and peer and instructor feedback in regard to broaching skills. In addition, as a follow up to that day of teaching and learning, students completed a case study assignment in their field placements. This involved sharing a case study, including a transcript of work with one client, in a 3-hour small group supervision with peers and the lecturer (author two), whereby students applied the course content to their case, including sharing their effort to apply broaching with an actual client.

Participants

Four students chose to participate in the research. While a small sample, given the small class size ($n=10$) and rich and in depth nature of data collection and analysis, this was deemed sufficient to generate meaningful findings in an IPA framework. Smith and Osborne (2015) stated that there is no right answer to the question of sample size in IPA research, with studies published with samples of one, four, nine, fifteen and so on. The aim is not to generate a representative or random sample; rather the essence of IPA is a commitment to a detailed interpretative account of the phenomenon or lived experience being explored. Three participants identified as female and one as male. One participant was aged in their 20s, two were in their 40s and one in their 50s. Three participants identified their nationality as New-Zealanders and one as British, one identifying their race as mixed Asian, the other three as White European. All participants identified as being cis-gender, heterosexual, middle class, able-bodied, and of no specific religion.

Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the University-level ethics and review boards for the respective researchers. Multiple ethical guidelines were applied to this study. These included use of informed consent, which addressed participant anonymity, protection from harm, and the right to refrain from the study or withdraw at any time. Full information was given in regard to the study, and the research process was separated from any course assessment processes as much as possible. Research assistants invited participants to take part in the research, answered any questions, and collected data. Course lecturers did not know who had chosen to take part in the research during the course period. Client identities were protected in all discussions through anonymity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data forms in IPA are qualitative in nature (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Data sources used for this study included participants' pre-course written reflections on their intersectional identities, participants' written online responses in relation to their experience of the curriculum, transcripts of participant focus group interviews undertaken at the conclusion of the research, and written case study assignments. Focus group interview questions were semi-structured and centred on students' experience of the course. Topics explored included student reactions and feelings in response to the class session, what was meaningful and challenging, what helped and impeded learning, and what impacts the curriculum had personally and for ongoing counselling practice.

The analytic process in IPA (Rodham et al., 2015) is known as the "double hermeneutic" where a researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their own experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 53). For the researcher, this is enacted in a conscious and systematic way. Researchers need to take care the ensure themes are represented in the data, and not emergent in a researcher's over-interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, the researchers compared and contrasted experiences across participants and data sets, identifying similarities and unique experiences, to ultimately identify a rich and detailed account of student experience of the CC curriculum. Each data source was engaged with in a close, line-by-line reading, coding and analysis. Each researcher initially engaged in this coding process individually and then came together to apply a cyclical process in assessing, comparing, and contrasting findings, as well as interpreting and synthesizing overall participant meanings according to experiences of a CC curriculum. This ultimately led to a collaborative identification of emergent patterns (themes). This collaborative process enabled a reflexive process to take place to test the coherence and plausibility of the ongoing interpretive development of themes (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009), and mitigate against the influence of researcher bias and preconceptions. Additionally, our distinctive yet complementary professional, geographical and cultural backgrounds "helped to ensure that the interpretation of

themes was not simply a manifestation of an individual researcher's professional socialisation, and aided the transparency of the coding process" (Reynolds & Prior, 2003, p. 787).

Trustworthiness

To ensure study trustworthiness, we attended to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criterion areas, and IPA's criterion of sensitivity to context, transparency, and importance (Rodham et al., 2015). Credibility and sensitivity were achieved through prolonged engagement in the context of the research, enabling understanding and rapport building, and triangulation through the use of multiple data sources and researchers. Transferability (and transparency) is made possible through careful consideration in the design of the phenomenon of study (the CC curriculum), through a thorough description of the method and analysis process as offered in this article, and through use of participant voice through quotes to exemplify themes and offer 'thick' description. The dependability and confirmability of this inquiry is established through keeping detailed records of the research and decision-making process, careful analysis of data in conjunction with a team of researchers, including an auditor and use of an additional analysis by a graduate assistant, in an effort to mitigate biased assumptions. Context was considered with use of an iterative examination of data to ensure interpretations were true to participant's experience and through assumptions of an intersectional lens, to take into consideration the complex interplay between participant context, histories, and personal traits (Bowleg, 2008). The importance and impact of this research for the field of counselling is made clear through the introduction and discussion in this paper.

Findings

In exploring student counsellor experience of a CC curriculum, thematic findings according to broaching emerged across participants. Following are four themes representing those experiences, illustrated through use of participant voice. These include *broaching as confronting*, *positive impacts of broaching*, *broaching challenges*, and *desire for continued learning*. Participant pseudonyms are used.

Broaching as Confronting

All participants indicated the broaching exercises as challenging for them, with "*confronting*" being the most common descriptor. Language that reflected this perception included "*discomfort" "flustered" "out of my comfort zone" "really hard*" and "*uncomfortable*." Rita offered a representative sentence illustrating these sentiments, noting, "*All this social justice, cultural humility, cultural broaching and … dominant norms, they're very confronting subjects*." Jo similarly described her perception of the broaching curriculum:

> I felt a little bit like thrown out of my comfort zone… around broaching in particular. Yes, that stuff really threw me and I remember leaving being like, "Oh I feel so confused and flustered."… I just don't think there could have been enough time in the world to really grasp them fully.

Participants noted that a sense of discomfort in broaching largely stemmed from the novel concept of openly acknowledging one's differing identities. This seemed counter to the social conditioning experienced by the White participants, who held the dominant normative belief of colourblindness (e.g., pretending not to see, and avoiding acknowledgement of, differences). For instance, Jo noted the concept of broaching as "*Really out there*," explaining that "*It didn't feel organic … someone comes in in a wheelchair, broach it … 'Wow, that feels impossible because I would never, I wouldn't do that.'*" Kate explained of her discomfort with the activity, in that it challenged learning around colourblindness:

> I think it's definitely a different way of thinking, isn't it, and it challenges that way of thinking … as well to confront some of those [beliefs] and to, you know have those conversations as you say with some people that you perhaps wouldn't have done before.

Positive Impacts of Broaching

In spite of this sense of discomfort, all participants noted finding great value in the practice of acknowledging and exploring participant identities and counsellor-client differences. For instance, when asked at the end of the semester about new and salient learning from the course, Rita wrote "*There is strength in acknowledging difference*." For most, their perspectives of the practice were enhanced by positive experiences of applying broaching with actual clients, which had been a required part of the course. Kate specifically described success with a broaching experience with her client, inspiring her to continue with this tool in the future:

> New knowing that has emerged [in class] is how powerful broaching is … With this client, she was able to disclose her sexuality, I was the first adult the client had told. This learning will be applied in my work with clients through having confidence to broach.

Rita also described perceived positive impacts of broaching:

> After [the client] disclosed his identities, I asked him about his preferred pronoun and preferred name in hopes that it would convey respect for his choices. __ shared his preferred name and seemed relieved to do so. I have since referred to him as such in our sessions. Building trust with another adult figure at school seemed like an important step towards building an alliance as he faces daily sceptics in some of his teachers.

Jo and Kate cited the broaching curriculum as the most meaningful learning in the course, with Kate explaining how she valued its potential impacts:

> Making the most of the opportunity to discuss ethnic identity with the individuals can bring up important information about their identity and how they see themselves. … I have more ideas about how to explore culture and ethnicity in more open and non-assuming ways. I believe this will lead to discussions that are more meaningful to the client.

Jo also noted appreciation of the learning around broaching, and expressed belief that discomfort naturally aligned with this new and meaningful learning:

> I find discomfort important for learning … It was a lot about a lot of uncomfortableness, not necessarily in a bad way either … I felt like sitting with that was kind of a lot of the point of it.

Broaching Challenges

Participants cited multiple challenges in learning how to broach. Examples included questions of timing (when to broach), missed broaching opportunities, failed broaching attempts, misattuned broaching, and unchecked assumptions that resulted in inappropriate or failed broaching experiences. At times, participants expressed awareness of their own broaching missteps, at other times, peer and supervisor reflection increased their awareness of challenges—hence, group supervision in the course deepened learning around the practice.

Missed broaching opportunities were a common experience. Jo noted awareness of this with a client who described themselves as '*half and half*' in relation to their two ethnicity identities, saying, "*I wish I had stayed with this topic and aspect of identity longer and dove into what being 'half and half' means to the client. This was a missed opportunity to explore a shift in the session.*" Jo noted that she had, mistakenly, assumed her client would more strongly identify with the culture of her birthplace where she had spent most of her life. This assumption inhibited her ability to respond (and broach) with curiosity and cultural humility.

Kate similarly reflected upon a missed broaching opportunity with her client, saying:

> Another identity that could have been broached is cultural background, for example, "I'm originally from the UK, I've been in New Zealand for nearly 16 years, I don't have any experience of growing up here, is there anything that's important to you that would be helpful for me to know – your background or how you see your culture?" This could have been done in the first session.

Rita acknowledged a missed opportunity as well, and mused as to the possible impacts of having broached on the counselling process and relationship:

> I did not find the opportunity or need to broach with __ … I recognise, however, that by doing so, it is possible that he probably would have felt more comfortable earlier on the process. … If I could do it over, I would [broach] following the question of his preferred name and pronouns. It would have

> added another dimension to our discussions and another level of respect and comfort that would lead to a collaborative alliance.

There were several times that participants questioned the appropriateness of their broaching. For instance, Sam noted struggling with his motivation for broaching gender, as a means for placating his own feelings of discomfort: "*I suspect this may have been a part of my own need to express humility, I felt guilt at her experience of males and wanted to share this as best I could.*" Jo also questioned her broaching approach, after the group supervision process illuminated broaching language that implied a limited, binary perspective of the client's identity:

> I noticed I am continually asking about the differences between the cultural groups. I wonder how the question may have been responded to if I had phased it without drawing attention to the differences specifically. Alternatively, I could have just asked what the client had noticed, which could have led to discussions about either differences or similarities.

At times, broaching efforts were impeded by counsellor misattunement to the client's needs or goals. Sam cited an example of broaching and client misattunement:

> I re-broached [a client's family constellation] during the recorded session and she responded by drawing my attention to the fact she had already answered the question … This was an example of inappropriate broaching, I was trying to get her to talk about something which, had I listened better I would have known to avoid.

Counsellors' assumptions at times also led to broaching challenges. For instance, Jo recognized that her assumption of the client's perception of broaching led her to abruptly change the subject, therefore possibly missing a chance to deepen the conversation:

> I felt a bit of reluctance from the client to share any negative generalizations about Kiwis, therefore I was quick to jump to a different line of questioning. I wonder if it would have been helpful for her and I to explore these ideas in more detail.

Desire for Continued Learning

When asked to reflect upon preferred areas of continued learning for their course, participants all noted a desire to advance broaching knowledge and skills. Broaching improvement included better understanding and addressing complex issues associated with identities, from intersectional complexities to issues of power, privilege, and oppression. This desired learning was stated verbally in the interviews and was also written in post-group reflections. As an example, Jo noted desired growth in regard to broaching client experiences of oppression:

> Another challenge I faced was how to address issues of gender and power and how to navigate a helpful conversation about the issues for the client. … I hope to gain some strategies on how to address these issues in a helpful way.

Sam was conflicted in relation to potential assumptions he may have made, reflections from others in the group supervision process, and the client's reality of their work together: :

> Reviewing my notes, after group supervision, I had also written "Yet another man loading on her, how to flip it?" and "How not to repeat the oppressive pattern, how to give the power back?" … I felt uncomfortable with these comments, struggled to recognise where this occurred and need to be vigilant for it in my practise… To truly know the answer to those questions I would have needed to broach these possibilities with [the client]. … The need to explore those possibilities of power imbalance, regardless of gender or ethnicity, is my new knowing from this reflective and reflexive process.

Jo similarly reflected on desired future learning in regard to checking personal assumptions and understanding of the complexity of client identities through broaching:

> Through this reflective process I have realised that I am needing to work on my unconscious assumptions and curiosities in order to have a more client-led practise. I have realised that people do not always fit or identify with the preassigned labels of ethnicity.

Similar to her peers' desire to advance understanding of critical and intersectional issues, Kate noted:

> My hope is for ongoing development of new learnings and skills to become more critically reflexive, particularly in relation to impacts of power, social structures, cultural identities and our own values and how these influence the interactions within a counselling setting.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand counselling students' experiences of a CC curriculum new to a Master of Counselling programme at one New Zealand University. Participants noted thematic experiences specific to the broaching curriculum and practice. Broaching, as a new concept, was experienced as disorienting and "confronting" by the learners, whose prior social conditioning had taught them to avoid the acknowledgement of individual sociocultural differences. This conditioning seemed to reflect a norm of avoiding talk of difference in the NZ context, particularly for those of dominant cultures, reflective of a common national discourse of 'we're all New Zealanders' (Wetherell, 2019). Such a norm favours a focus on the universality or sameness of one's identities and experiences, and can render discussions of power and privilege (racism, whiteness, ableism, privilege, the myth

of meritocracy, individualism) as especially taboo. This norm also serves to reinforce a cultural competence and 'expert/mastery' orientation, which assumes counsellor expertise on the client and precludes any need to broach and openly explore unique client traits, experiences, and meaning making of the world.

Hence, the counselling students in this study described feelings of discomfort and uneasiness in applying a skill that felt counter to prior learning according to basic cultural communication norms. However, while initially reacting strongly and somewhat negatively to the broaching curriculum, over time, all students noted broaching as one of the most important and significant learnings of the course, recognizing its potentially positive client impacts. This growth is underscored by the fact that students cited improved broaching tactics as a primary post-course learning goal. Consequently, student commentary highlighted the fact that, over time and with particular learning experiences, a paradigm shift happened, whereby they assumed positive perceptions of broaching after realizing the positive impacts of the act when applying it with actual clients.

These learners' initial negative reactions to new information are akin to what educational theorists describe as cognitive dissonance (Snipes & LePeau, 2017) for students faced with paradigm shifting knowledge, particularly when that knowledge is counter to one's prior learning. A sense of cognitive uneasiness or confusion is natural, especially when that learning is transformative in nature, as it poses new or even opposing ideas to prior learning (Mezirow, 2000). Broaching conversations may be particularly challenging for those newly faced with their personal privilege, as skill acquisition requires recognition and exploration of client sociocultural realities and experiences which, in turn, requires acknowledging 'confronting' issues of power, privilege, and systemic oppression (Day-Vines et al., 2021). Apte (2009) suggests that for transformative learning to take place, as educators, we must consider the connection between learners' inner and outer worlds, and the ways the wider social context confirms and shapes their assumptions. Such assumptions or frames of reference may initially be invisible for students occupying positions of privilege and thus educators must be prepared to make such connections visible and for responding to the ensuing discomfort this may engender.

Teaching of transformative learning, therefore, requires understanding of the challenges it poses and of the growth process in facing and internalizing new information that counters one's prior learning. Students' initial reactions could be misinterpreted by instructors as a resistance or refusal to learn, which could even result in instructor reluctance to persist with a particular curriculum (Mezirow, 2000). Hence, experts have cited the need for instructor skill in addressing learner dissonance, including validation of learners' experiences and the fostering of vulnerability among students and between faculty and students (Snipes & LePeau, 2017).

Instructors of such a curriculum must also possess a "commitment to the psychologically and emotionally taxing work of challenging analysing power, privilege, and others' oppression" (Williams et al., 2021, p. 268). This commitment requires that instructors possess a certain comfort level with learner emotions, to recognize and work with "triggers for transformative learning," and to normalise "a time of retreat or dormancy" (Apte, 2009, p. 172), all of which require sufficient time, space, and an ongoing reflective process, in order to incorporate new learning (Apte, 2009).

Finally, considering participant initial negative reactions to broaching as a practice, there is a possibility that students would have refrained from use of the activity in the absence of a requirement to apply it in actual client practice. Hence, the importance of requiring use of the activity in a field course seems apparent. Thematic commentary suggests that application allowed the students to shift in their perspectives of, and comfort level with, the practice, to understand it as one of the most important learnings of the course. Beyond the need for application in order to see value of the practice, repeated broaching practice over time seems important, as they described missteps and mistakes in their practicing, which makes sense, as applying new knowledge and learning a new skill is a process that takes repetition and requires mistakes in conjunction with reflexive practice (Mezirow, 2000). In turn, use of an educational space to process the nuances of broaching missteps, and to improve learning skill and confidence in broaching, seemed essential, with both peer and instructor feedback noted as useful by learners in their growth over time.

Apte (2009) suggested that in order to change learners' frames of reference in regard to new learning, they need opportunities to "trial new approaches, practice new skills and experiment with possibilities" (p. 184), while educators must foster a group environment that enables feedback and reflection. In this study, longer-term and in-depth exposure and practice of the concept and skill seemed to effect learner transformation. Specifically, the combination of the teaching day, subsequent application of broaching in actual counselling settings, and an in-depth case reflection of the field experience through a written assignment and group supervision process, seemed to facilitate learner paradigm shifts from negative to positive.

A unique aspect of this study was the unearthing of specific broaching missteps by the students. This theme highlights the nuanced challenges with learning broaching, and provides direction for educators and supervisors in ways to anticipate common challenges as well as to better train and supervise beginning counsellors in broaching. Some suggestions include the need to anticipate these possible new student learner challenges, including not knowing when/how/why to broach (timing and motivation); misattunement; assumptions based on the biases we all have, and; missed opportunities. These findings align with the North American broaching literature (e.g. Day-Vines et al., 2018; King & Summers, 2020), which suggested that counsellor broaching behaviour is shaped by multiple factors and likely exists along a continuum, from avoidant to a "well-integrated consideration of multi-cultural concerns within the helping process and outside of It" (Day-Vines et al., 2018, p. 101).

Another finding in this study suggested that learners may struggle to accurately conceptualize complex intersectional broaching, as was suggested by Jo's binary perception of her client's nationality/ethnicity in this study. Over time and through observing the limitations of their initial attempts, students seemed to move from a cultural competence and 'expert/mastery' orientation in regard to learning the broaching skill, with an initial sense of having to get it 'right,' in order to assume an expert role, to increasing awareness of the need for a more nuanced, open, and critically conscious orientation/underpinning, to better follow the client's lead and, therefore, to avoid biased assumptions. Some began to embrace a not knowing, and to understand that being comfortable in one identity

trait will not guarantee comfort in broaching all traits. Learners must have complex conceptualizations of the identities and related systems of power before they can dialogue around them, and educational programmes are one key area to advance this form of cognitive complexity (Welfare & Borders, 2010).

Consequently, deeper personal and conceptual work on intersectional theory and identity constructs unique to the context is required of learners, as a precursor to enacting more sophisticated and accurate broaching practices. Given the history in the Aotearoa context of both an aversion to attending to difference (i.e. 'we are all New Zealanders') and the dominance of a 'cultural' frame which centres developing competence on the 'other', encompassing structural and critical consciousness would seem to be even more imperative in educational curriculum. Considering the complexity of these issues, broaching as a concept might ideally be introduced immediately in, and infused across, a counselling program, to allow for deeper and more effective learning.

Finally, the student of colour in this study cited unique experiences from their white peers, such as being on the receiving end of colourblindness, and so they cited greater ease or willingness to embrace broaching practice, viewing it as a tool that validated their non-dominant identities and corresponding experiences of oppression. This did not, however, mean that they found all identities comfortable to broach, as some were cited as new and therefore discomforting to broach (such as sexual orientation). Hence, instructors ideally would refrain from making assumptions in regard to students' broaching comfort levels in regard to their identities and traits, to recognize that learner complex traits and experiences will uniquely impact their learning process.

Limitations and Future Directions

Readers should consider findings in light of a single population and within a specific geographic setting, when seeking to apply themes to their own contexts. Broaching experiences and challenges specific to this study may be uniquely impacted by the context and population, and so future studies could consider examining learner experiences of this curriculum in other settings and with learners of other identities. In addition, considering specific broaching identities, it was clear that some identities were easier to broach then others, for some, as impacted by contextual sociocultural issues in individual participants' prior knowledge or experiences, and this phenomenon should be considered in future research. Finally, this study in part allowed learner self-reporting of their broaching practices with clients. Considering that self-narratives can be prejudiced by participant desire to appear in a more positive or socially acceptable light (Caskie et al., 2014), future studies could determine actual learner behaviours through observations of learners in applying broaching practices with clients.

Conclusion

Participants in the study described their experiences of a CC learning intervention, with specific commentary on a broaching curriculum. This study offers a first of a kind examination of the process of learning of a counselling skill necessary for future counsellors. Findings suggest that learners initially struggled to engage in behaviours that contradicted prior learning and social norms, effecting an emotional reaction and a sense of cognitive dissonance. Actual practice with clients resulted in positive perceptions of the intervention, while illuminating multiple missteps in attempting broaching. Myriad challenges in applying broaching as a skill were illuminated, providing insight into better ways to prepare helping professionals to work across differences, to ultimately effect more responsive and critically and structurally conscious services.

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Declarations

The study was approved by the IRB of Villanova University (IRB-FY2019-138) and the Human Research Ethics committee of the University of Canterbury (2019/26/ERHEC).

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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