Exploring Cultural Factors in Counseling: Experiences of Broaching Behaviors among Professional Counselors

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Abstract. A growing body of literature on broaching supports its effectiveness and addresses some challenges for applying this method to counseling practice. A thematic analysis with a phenomenological perspective was used to explore counselors' experiences with broaching in their clinical practice to gain a greater understanding of its actual implementations in counseling. Four themes were identified through analysis of semi-structured interviews with five participants. They are: 1) demonstrating social justice and advocacy orientation as a foundation for broaching; 2) acknowledging the role of counselor self-disclosure in broaching; 3) contextual nature of broaching; and 4) commitment to engaging in ongoing development of broaching skills.

Keywords: Broaching; Counseling; Thematic Analysis; Professional Counselor.

INTRODUCTION

Existing literature underscores the need to examine the effects of sociocultural factors in counseling to enhance the working alliance as well as maintain client trust, engagement, and retention in counseling practices (Alegría et al., 2012; Day-Vines et al., 2013; Nair et al., 2020; Yeh et al., 2016). Counselors' competency in addressing sociocultural factors in clinical settings may be demonstrated through their practice of *broaching behavior*, defined as "a consistent and ongoing attitude of openness with a genuine commitment by the counselor to continually invite the client to explore issues of diversity" (Day-Vines et al., 2007, p. 402). Using broaching, counselors can intentionally address the impact of power dynamics in the client's sociocultural experiences of privilege and oppression (Erby & White, 2022; Lee et al., 2022). The ability of counselors to communicate their positionality, particularly acknowledgment of their privilege and its impact on counseling relationships with clients has been found

beneficial to clients (King & Borders, 2019). However, some qualitative studies have also found that both counselors in training and experienced professional counselors alike have expressed some hesitation to utilize broaching skills in sessions and have reported feeling uncomfortable with the practice (Askren et al., 2022; Barraclough et al., 2024, Bayne & Branco, 2018; Day-Vines et al., 2013; Jones & Welfare, 2017). Translating the learned knowledge of broaching into actual counseling practice has been a challenge for counselors (King, 2021). To contribute to the existing body of knowledge on applications of broaching in counseling, the present study sought to gain greater insight into how counselors utilize broaching in their clinical practice.

Given the ongoing demographic shifts and disparities in mental health care in the United States, it is important that counselors consider their levels of multicultural competencies in working with clients with diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds (Day-Vines et al., 2018; Jones & Welfare, 2017; Lee et al., 2022) as an

ethical practice (Lee, 2018). Additionally, *the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies* (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015) that are endorsed by the American Counseling Association encourage counselors to increase their awareness of the impact of the power dynamics, privilege, and systemic oppression on client outcomes and counseling relationships (Ratts et al., 2015).

Day-Vines et al (2007) identified five styles of broaching behavior on a continuum, including *avoidant, isolating, continuing/incongruent, integrated/congruent,* and *infusing*. According to this model, a counselor at the foundational level avoids broaching behavior (avoidant), uses it sparingly or prescriptively (isolating), or does so inconsistently (continuing/incongruent) or automatically without connecting it to the client's cultural lifestyle and circumstances (continuing/incongruent) (Day-Vines et al., 2020). A counselor who is at the integrated/congruent level makes appropriate references to racial, ethnic, and cultural factors to enable a client to interpret the influences. At the infused level, which is the most evolved, the counselor endorses a worldview that incorporates social justice (Day-Vines et al., 2020). It must however be recognized that the described levels in this model represent a continuum of counselor readiness to broach, and counselors are likely to differ based on their individual preparedness, experiences, worldviews (Barraclough et al., 2024), and racial identity development (Day-Vines et al., 2007; Day-Vines et al., 2022). A qualitative study with licensed professional counselors in addiction counseling settings revealed that counselors were likely to follow the clients' lead on when to explore cultural factors during intake (Jones & Welfare, 2017). Additionally, these counselors varied on which cultural factors to address but believed that timing mattered for any broaching to be effective (Jones & Welfare, 2017). Relatedly, Bayne and Branco (2018) found that broaching behavior was influenced by the counselor's comfort level with addressing cross-cultural issues, intentionality of the practice, and individualized styles, making it a subjective practice.

In addition to understanding broaching behaviors on a continuum, Day-Vines et al. (2020) developed the Multidimensional Model of Broaching Behavior (MMBB) as a framework for understanding broaching behaviors in various contexts. The MMBB was prompted by concerns that the client could feel disempowered due to the power differential between counselor and client, and consequently not reveal the more latent aspects of their cultural identity unless initiated by the counselor (Day-Vines et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2023). The MMBB consists of four domains of broaching, including *intracounseling* (inviting discussion of REC [race, ethnic and cultural] factors within the counselor-client dyad), *intraindividual* (addressing intersectionality within client identity), *intra-REC* (issues between the client and their identified REC groups), and *inter-REC* (exploring systemic and institutional discriminatory experiences of the client) (Day-Vines et al., 2020). Implementing the MMBB in a psychiatry program curriculum resulted in some positive outcomes (Cogan et al., 2024). Specifically, second-year psychiatry residents who completed a six-hour virtual training on the MMBB reported a significant decrease in the continuing/incongruent scale and an increase in the integrated/congruent scale of the Broaching Attitudes and Behavior Survey (BABS) at the post-test (Cogan et al., 2024).

As mentioned previously, the main purpose of this study was to explore professional counselors' experiences broaching cultural factors in their clinical practice. A phenomenological lens was fitting for this study as it seeks to explore and understand people's lived experiences with a particular phenomenon (Chi-Chen & Wang, 2021).

METHOD

Researchers

The research team for this present study consisted of two doctoral-level and one master's level counselors. The first author is a full-time faculty, the second author is a licensed professional counselor in private practice, and the third author is a licensed associate counselor and a doctoral student. All three members are Asian and bilingual or multilingual and identify as cisgender women.

Participants

Individuals who held a master's degree or higher and were licensed as a mental health provider were included in the study. All participants held either a professional or an

associate license to provide mental health services in their respective states in the United States. The average years of clinical experience was 19.2 years. All participants were over 18 years old, two of whom identified as Asian, and three identified as White. Gender identities included three men and two women. One of the participants also identified as two-spirit. All participants spoke English, and two spoke additional languages. No incentives were provided for participation in this study.

Interview Questionnaire

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from the participants. A draft of the interview questionnaire created by the research team was reviewed by two mental health providers who were familiar with the concept of broaching and utilized it in their clinical practice. To minimize researcher biases, these external reviewers differed in racial and ethnic backgrounds from the members of the research team. The suggestions from the external reviewers were incorporated into the final version of the interview questionnaire which included 10 questions. Examples include "How would you describe your broaching behavior in counseling?"; "How do you go about deciding when to address cultural factors in the therapeutic space?"; Without compromising client confidentiality, could you share an example of how you have engaged in broaching in counseling?"; and "What else would you like the research team to know about your experience broaching in counseling that these questions didn't address?" The study proposal was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the first author's institution.

Data Collection

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. The announcement about the research was shared with a few professional associations. Furthermore, a recruitment email was sent to professionals within the research team's academic and clinical networks inviting them to participate in an interview as well as asking them to share the announcement with other potential participants. Once a consent form was completed, each participant was asked to complete a demographic form using an assigned ID number so that their name would not be associated with the

information provided on the form. Subsequently, each participant completed one semi-structured interview via Zoom.

Data Analysis

The six phases of a thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used as a structured guide to navigate the process of analyzing the data. These included 1) gaining familiarity with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) identifying themes across codes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) writing the report consisting of the fully developed themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding reliability which is one of the major schools of thought within thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was used for this study to develop themes by reaching a consensus among all three researchers. Inductive analysis was employed in coding the transcripts so that this process would be "data-driven" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.83) instead of being guided by a particular theory or previous research findings.

First, each research team member read all five transcripts independently to begin the data analysis process. To reach a sufficient level of consistency in coding the transcripts, the research team selected one transcript and agreed to read it independently. Next, the research team compared their analyses of the same transcript to create a coding framework. A consensus on a code was achieved after members reviewed several extracts from the transcript and agreed on the code. Subsequently, each member reviewed all five transcripts independently using the coding framework that was developed from the initial reviews of the first transcript. After the researchers completed their independent coding of the transcripts, several meetings were held to discuss their respective analyses. While some codes that were initially developed remained the same, some were refined, and a few were additionally developed upon consensus. Differences were resolved by discussing each other's thoughts on a particular code and going back to the transcripts as needed.

To search for potential themes, the researchers identified the codes that reflected the experiences of at least three participants (across 60% of the data). A summary of each theme was developed and finalized by the research team. Member checking was conducted to ensure that the initial findings reflected the experiences of

the participants as much as possible. All five participants were invited to take part in member checking and review a summary of the preliminary findings of the interviews. Four participants agreed to review the findings. While all four participants indicated that the findings were reflective of their broaching experiences, one of them mentioned that some themes were better representative of their experience than others. Input from the participants was incorporated in the final stage of the data analysis.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, utilizing multiple strategies to increase the credibility of study findings such as clarifying one's biases that may be relevant to a study and conducting member checking is recommended (Creswell, 2012). Hence, the present study began with the researchers' meeting to openly discuss potential assumptions and biases about broaching they may bring into this study. They also reflected on the potential influence of their culture on their attitudes toward the study.

Researchers can utilize strategies such as cross-checking codes and following clearly defined coding procedures to achieve a sufficient level of consistency in coding to demonstrate the reliability of the study (Creswell, 2012). In this study, all transcripts were reviewed against the recorded interviews for accuracy. Several meetings were held to compare and contrast codes that were developed independently by all researchers. The research team followed the agreed-upon procedures to develop the codes and themes that are detailed in the previous section. Additionally, member checking was conducted to ensure that the themes accurately reflected the participants' clinical experiences with broaching.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored participants' experiences with broaching in their clinical practice. The following four themes were identified: 1) demonstrating social justice and advocacy orientation as a foundation for broaching; 2) acknowledging the role of counselor self-disclosure in broaching; 3) contextual nature of broaching; and 4)

commitment to engaging in ongoing development of broaching skills.

Demonstrating Social Justice and Advocacy Orientation as a Foundation for Broaching

Three participants spoke about how social justice and advocacy orientation informed their attitudes toward broaching. For instance, these participants spoke about the importance of considering the effects of external forces that have an impact on clients. Participant A spoke about working with a Black male client over 10 years ago by broaching the topic of race and gender while considering a particular context:

> I didn't do this right in the beginning of my work with him, because I wasn't quite up to speed on doing this sooner than later. But it just dawned on me one day like, "Oh, my goodness, I am missing a whole aspect of his life." So, I asked him, "What is it like for you being a Black man on a campus that is mostly White? And are there any experiences that have been hurtful to you that you would like to talk about?"

Participant A recalled how this broaching led the client to open up and talk about the experience of racial profiling and marginalization he experienced on campus.

For Participant B, examining systemic oppression, including their part in perpetuating it, was a crucial aspect of counseling work with clients. The following statement underscores Participant B's commitment to confronting white male privilege that may perpetuate systemic oppression.

> You know in our country we have not…there has never been a conciliation process with the White men, wealthy White heterosexual men have said this is the lies that founded this country, this is the truth that we need to speak so we can heal and I take it as a wealthy White heterosexual male, I take responsibility for that. To me, unless that happens healing will never, real healing will never happen.

Furthermore, Participant B believed that counselors are ethically responsible to broach
("This is an ethical issue") because they considered the system of oppression as an ethical issue that counselors must address.

Acknowledging the Role of Counselor Self-Disclosure in Broaching

In addition to exploring the different cultural identities of the client, all participants acknowledged the role of self-disclosure as a significant aspect of broaching. When they were asked to describe their comfort level in sharing about themselves with the clients, the answers varied from feeling "very comfortable" to "it really depends on the client population and the atmosphere." For three participants, their intentions in self-disclosing were to build a therapeutic rapport with clients and as a foundation for cultivating trust and comfort with clients. Participant C spoke about promoting authenticity and trust within therapeutic relationships through self-disclosure as a counselor.

> I don't hesitate to disclose if somebody is asking because usually, people ask by the time we are already quite comfortable. So, I do not hesitate to disclose pretty much anything about my culture because I just feel like if they are asking, and they are interested, I think they have a right to know because they are opening up a lot to me, even though I am the therapist, I understand that dynamic, but beyond a therapist and beyond a client, there is a person who is looking for somebody who can, who they can trust beyond therapy in a way.

Four participants acknowledged their limitations in being able to relate to the client's experiences and identified elements of their identity such as privilege that may exist as an initial barrier. For instance, Participant A acknowledged how counselors' privileged identities may potentially hinder their ability to relate to clients, particularly clients of color.

> I usually bring it up pretty quickly to acknowledge, I acknowledge and recognize that there are differences,

some of which can be seen between us and some that I can't see, and you can't see. And I want to also acknowledge that, especially if the person is a person of color, I can see that difference, acknowledge the privilege that I have as Caucasian and that could possibly or potentially influence what I say or do.

Three participants indicated that they intentionally and carefully engaged in self-disclosure on their professional websites and considered it as part of broaching. For instance, Participant D's website informed potential clients of a professional commitment to advocating for and providing services to LGBTQIA+ and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities. Similarly, Participant B's professional website indicated a strong commitment to social justice (e.g., "… I am a racial justice activist"). These participants believed that this type of self-disclosure affords potential clients a chance to get to know them on a deeper level.

Contextual Nature of Broaching

Four participants discussed the contextual nature of broaching. Specifically, the majority of the participants discussed how they assumed responsibility for initiating broaching in counseling. For example, Participant D spoke about the importance of acknowledging how cultural differences between the client and the counselor could hinder a counseling relationship. Participant D further stated that not acknowledging this potential disconnect can damage therapeutic relationships (e.g., "… and [if] it is unacknowledged, then it harms the relationship").

Similarly, Participant E worked toward determining the appropriateness of broaching:

> I think the challenge is, I guess, like finding the right time and when, just because there are stuff I am definitely curious about, but it might not be relevant to what we are talking about or the issue right now. So I think just finding the right space for it and using it in a beneficial way.

While the participants in this study seemed to assume the responsibility to broach, they also spoke about the courage that took them

to engage in broaching behavior. Participant A spoke about "harnessing" one's fear and being open to examine one's privilege as essential steps to broaching effectively:

> I think the first one is harnessing your own fear, and I think a person, a therapist has to be knowledgeable about cultural differences, they have had to spend time learning, and particularly challenging and becoming aware of their own privileges, whatever they are.

Commitment to Engaging in Ongoing Development of Broaching Skills

When the participants were asked how they developed broaching skills, all of them described it as an ongoing learning process. In addition to gaining knowledge and skills to work with specific groups, three participants mentioned engaging in continuous self-reflection of one's culture and its influence on their personal and professional development. For instance, Participant D stated, "… expanding my self-awareness is just like a huge part of life... It is like such a part of my being, reflection and learning…" Participant A reflected on the process of acknowledging one's privilege as a White person:

> But my first reaction was, I didn't grow up privileged. I am not privileged. It took me a while to wrestle with that and understand what it meant. And until a counselor really understands and accepts that is part of, and I think everybody has privilege of some kind. Until those are identified and owned, that is the biggest challenge of broaching, you have to know that is there.

Furthermore, participants developed awareness, knowledge, and skills through various learning opportunities. These included gaining foundational knowledge as part of one's graduate counseling program, attending conferences and workshops, seeking employment opportunities to work with marginalized groups, working with supervisors whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own, learning from leaders in the field, and sharing their expertise with others. For instance, Participant D stated, "…being intentional about seeking leaders in organizations where I worked, supervisors who don't hold the same identities as me, particularly in terms of gender and race, have always been the focus for me."

Learning went beyond professional development for some participants. Three participants mentioned personal experiences such as traveling, attending cultural celebrations and events, as well as participating in social justice and advocacy efforts in their communities as opportunities for increasing their awareness and skills to engage in broaching.

Discussion

For the majority of the participants in this study, the spirit of social justice and advocacy seemed to serve as a foundation for their approach to broaching. Specifically, some of the study participants explained how they acknowledged differences in identity within the counseling relationship and in some cases, their privileged status and how it may limit their ability to relate to the depth of the client's life experience. These examples suggest that the participants practiced broaching within the intracounseling dimension of the MMBB developed by Day-Vines et al (2020). According to Day-Vines et al. (2020), counselors who broach within the intracounseling dimension do so to address potential power imbalance in counseling relationships and communicate to clients that open discussions on race, ethnicity, and culture are welcomed. Additionally, some participants might have practiced broaching within the dimension of inter-REC (Day-Vines et al., 2020). For example, Participant A asked a Black male client what it was like for him to study in a predominantly White institution. Another counselor discussed how they facilitate clients' self-reflection and examination of power and privilege in their lives. Counselors who broach within the inter-REC dimension recognize the effects of racism and other forms of oppression and discrimination on clients (Day-Vines et al., 2020).

A counselor's responsibility to broach, which is considered an essential aspect of broaching (King, 2021), was reflected in the participants' responses. These participants emphasized that the decision to broach should be intentional, rather than waiting for the client to bring such ideas forward. While the participants

in the present study assumed responsibility to broach, some of them also indicated that broaching is contextually based. These participants identified specific methods for determining appropriateness to broach for a particular client within the context of that session. For instance, to determine the timing of broaching in sessions, the participants considered the client's readiness and relevance to the client's presenting concern. According to Jones and Welfare (2017), finding an appropriate timing to broach was also important to the participants in their study. Although the present study did not assess how often the participants initiated broaching various cultural topics, it was apparent that they took the initiative in introducing cultural discussion into sessions.

The participants in the present study differed in their levels of comfort in self-disclosing certain aspects of their cultural background to clients. However, they seemed to agree that self-disclosure strengthened therapeutic relationships or normalized the clients' experiences (e.g., they are not alone). A similar finding was noted by Jones and Welfare (2017) in that one of the participants spoke about how his openness to sharing his cultural background with clients might help to increase trust. Furthermore, counselors' willingness to acknowledge their privilege and its impact on a therapeutic relationship have been found to benefit clients (King & Borders, 2019).

Based on the broaching continuum model developed by Day-Vines et al. (2007), the participants in this study may be best described as either an integrated/congruent or an infusing behavior. Counselors with integrated/congruent and infusing styles demonstrate "an enduring commitment to social justice and equality that transcends the bounds of their professional identity" (Day-Vines et al., 2007, p. 406). At least three participants in this study spoke about their commitment to social justice and advocacy, including acknowledging one's privileged status and the impact of oppression and discrimination on clients. Additionally, the study participants gave several examples that illustrated how they intentionally engaged in professional development opportunities to develop broaching skills and become involved in advocacy efforts to support marginalized communities.

A small sample size with some noticeable diversity among the participants, especially differences in age and clinical experience, might have presented some challenges in strengthening the themes that were reflective of all five participants in the study. Future research projects may benefit from having a larger participant group with similar intersecting cultural identities as well as levels of education and clinical experiences.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Through a thematic analysis of counselors' experiences with broaching, four themes were identified in the present study. The findings indicated that the participants employed a social justice framework as a foundation and assumed responsibility for broaching cultural factors in counseling. Additionally, the participants used self-disclosure to address power imbalance in a therapeutic relationship and build a strong rapport with clients. Developing broaching skills was described as an ongoing learning process in which the participants engaged in continuous reflection and learning of their culture and cultures that are different from their own.

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