LEARNING TO TALK ABOUT RACE
AN UNFINISHED CONVERSATION

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A RETURN TO MY PAST

What are you?

I remember telling and retelling my cultural identity story to the white-haired ladies at Grandma's beauty shop, kids on the playground, strangers at the grocery store, men at the bars, patrons where I worked, my Vietnamese nail techs, and generally speaking any Asian person I encounter. As an Asian American, I cannot hide my *otherness*, and, yet, I do not have an Asian experience either.

My mother was adopted from a Japanese orphanage when she was two by my blue-eyed grandmother and her military husband, who, not soon enough, became an ex-husband. My mom's sister, who is Korean, was adopted and brought home when my mom was nine and my aunt was seven. Later married to the man who I knew as my grandfather, the family presented as Texans in a Southwest Bordertown.

My father was a first-generation Mexican American who grew up during a time when assimilation was a priority, and speaking Spanish in school was unacceptable and often punished. My family was middle class. We had a swimming pool and two cars, and we went on vacations. My parents worked all of the time to make this happen. For this reason, I grew up mostly at my grandmother's house and remember that I was only allowed to play with the children next door through the chain link fence that separated our properties. They were "Mexicans" according to my grandparents.

In school, children made fun of my slanted eyes, and I missed meanings in conversation when the language slipped in and out of Spanglish. My insides did not match my outsides. I saw the world through the blue and green eyes of my adoptive grandparents. Their lens was laced with bigotry; they didn't really know how to include or grow or edify my kind.

I grew up in a home where the "Mexicans and Orientals" were discussed as less than, but I was not. I was valued—a possession perhaps. Descriptors like "the illegals, the jigaboo, and the Chinaman" were used to describe our neighbors. Hearing how my grandparents discussed people of color and immigrants kept me longing and looking in mirrors trying to come up with a good enough answer for the recurring social question, "What are you?"

In 2019 and four and a half decades into my life, I was invited to learn about a concept called *currere* and write from my Un-Asian experience. The group of women who invited me into this project had similar experiences regarding their complicated Asian identities. There was something sacred and healing about safely exploring who I was with others who were doing similar work. *Currere* offered us a reflective opportunity to get to know ourselves without the pressure of pre-constructed ideas of what identity entails. Instead, we wrote from our own experiences in relation to the concept and focus of the project. That focus was our Un-Asian experience in America. We had common and uncommon experiences. We connected over the humorous and exhausting number of times we'd been asked, "Where are you from?" We shared tears over feeling

misunderstood and over our own misunderstandings. Most importantly, we concluded that we are more than our race, ethnicity, and origin. As a bonus, the ongoing cycle of *currere*-thinking also gave us permission to evolve and continue to consider this evolution and our origins with each future experience as more pieces of our identity formation.

A Step Towards my Future

As a counselor, counselor educator, and cultural responsiveness curriculum researcher, the intersectionality of my identity grows. *Currere* became a reflective practice, and I wanted to take it further. My best hopes are to create psychologically safe conversations where people can learn about themselves, one another, and recognize racism and bias without offense or shame, but rather as the systemic education we receive without our consent.

Research and Pedagogy

Counselor preparation programs have a responsibility to create safe learning spaces with empirically informed lessons that prepare clinicians who become increasingly self-aware and can think critically, act responsively, and practice active reflection when serving diverse client populations (Celinska & Swazo, 2016; Haskins & Singh, 2015; Ratts et al., 2016). This ethical responsibility is essential in counselor education. To improve future therapeutic relationships and outcomes, counseling students must learn to recognize and identify the social and cultural constructs that intersect with their identities and the identities of their clients. Counselors and counselor educators alike must also examine personal experiences of racism to build an awareness of existing and nuanced biases (Chan et al., 2018; Haskins & Singh, 2015; Matthews et al., 2018; Ratts et al., 2016). Such awareness can improve instruction, clinical assessment, and treatment (Sue et al., 2009). Yet, evidence-based pedagogy is still needed to create lessons that encourage critical reflection and conversation, while ensuring experienced safety for all learners and educators (Chan et al., 2018; Choate & Granello, 2006, Garza-Fraire & Stark, 2023).

To explore this research gap, for my doctoral dissertation, I proposed the use of *currere* as pedagogy for teaching courses that include topics on social and cultural diversity in counselor education. My research excluded, *currere* is not used as a counseling tool or known in any research regarding counseling. Yet, I found value in learning about *currere* and experiencing my own growth in self-awareness by engaging in the practice, and I wanted to bring the method with me into my work as a counselor and counselor educator. Afterall, it was the first invitation I had ever received to safely explore and further understand who I am from a lens of diversity and belonging.

In counselor education, we know that structure in reflective practice leads to quality outcomes (Ziomek-Daigle, 2017). *Currere* offers a loosely structured framework for ongoing reflection that is contextually relevant to learners and that can be revisited for ongoing reflection work throughout their careers (Pinar, 2014). *Currere* as a practice begins with personal and autobiographical reflections (Jung, 2016) and continues with collaborative conversations regarding practitioners' experiences. Although research regarding the efficacy of *currere* in counselor education is not available, the use of *currere* in the fields of education and social sciences exists and prompted the exploration and evaluation of its use in the graduate counseling classroom (D. Brown, 2018; Martin, 2018; Poetter, 2018).

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

For the qualitative study, 14 students engaged in a *currere* activity that included observations of reflective writing, discussion, and a final interview with me (the primary investigator) to better understand their experience of the activity. Participants were directed to (1) Describe a memory when they first became aware of their social and cultural identity, (2) Explain how this experience was racialized or normalized, (3) Speak to any power or privilege that influenced this experience, (4) Identify how this experience might impact their identity and work as a counselor, and (5) Finally, on a scale from 1 to 10, report how safe they felt completing this activity (10 = safest).

Findings from this study suggest that students experience *currere* as a psychologically safe and beneficial, albeit challenging, learning opportunity. *Currere* appears to support beginning development for students in multicultural and social awareness, responsiveness, and advocacy (MSARA). Benefits of the *currere* lesson, as reported by students, included awareness, learning, thinking, empathy, and meaningful connections within the classroom (Garza-Fraire, 2022).

Counselors must develop MSARA related skills essential to providing ethical mental health services to culturally and socially diverse communities (Haskins & Singh, 2015; Matthews et al., 2018; Ratts et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2009). To meet these needs, effective teaching methods must exist. This *currere* study contributes to the scarce collection of pedagogical methods for instruction in MSARA skills for counselor education.

MY NOW, THEN, AND FUTURE

Once the dissertation was complete and I took my first faculty position, I experienced the struggles that instructors of color face when teaching on concepts of cultural humility and responsiveness or when trying to examine the importance of the decolonization of mental health for ethical practice with clients from diverse backgrounds (Yoon et al., 2014). The complexity of applying what I had learned through study, research, and small-scale application was more than I imagined. Additionally, and with no intent, I began experiencing the instructor reflexivity I had encouraged as a best practice based on the conclusions from my research (Garza-Fraire & Stark, 2023; Yoon & Kordesh, 2014).

Many students engaged in critical thinking and conversation using the *currere* method. These conversations were exciting and grew my personal awareness too. Conversely, over the course of three years, I also experienced resistance from a small but important group of students regarding specific course materials. Although this is expected and well documented in the literature, from a fragility standpoint, I observed a glimpse of something else. From them, I learned that, by inviting the self and its experiences into the learning process, a natural resistance and experience of psychological unsafety might also exist for students when their beliefs or experiences are challenged.

I wondered if feeling psychologically unsafe might be different from the fragility of ego or discomfort due to a narrative of passive or complicit behavior in the presence of racism. In the context of the newest political narratives, some students felt a need to protect their values and rights. One group of students challenged the use of the current textbook within a religious university setting due to a perceived agenda against white and or Christian experiences and beliefs. Though perhaps surprising, I found myself empathizing with their stance. I experienced a similar

dissonance when learning about my own cultural identity in relation to a system of racism I had experienced that was different than my textbooks described. I remember asking for more information about the school to prison pipeline in a graduate school course and feeling the eyes roll around me. I earnestly wanted to understand, while also having an unclear explanation of how I could be part of the problem or the solution as a 20-year public school educator and school counselor. The professor in that course encouraged me to *do more research* on the matter, and the conversation ceased. This experience brought up shame and doubt in my abilities as a professional and as a good enough human. I also learned that it was better not to ask questions about race in a classroom setting.

Some might name my experience a form of fragility, and I also know it was ignorance due to the context in which I was raised and the discrimination I experienced. I never asked for those experiences, and I can see both the privilege and oppression within that childhood today. However, it was only after *I did the research* that I better understood my racialized experiences in relation to the systemic conditions that exist. Prior to that, I experienced regret and shame for not knowing enough, feeling different, and misunderstood. As I look back, I am not sure all students leave the disenchantment within classroom learning environments with such tenacity and resolve; as an educator, I want to ensure classrooms become a place where a student's questions are carefully considered and discussed. If we want *all* students to examine their identity in relation to the diversity that exists within our population, they must first be afforded the opportunity to be honest about their resistance or confusion and have a safe place to explore their complex feelings.

As I look back on my own experience within *currere* and the reasons it was meaningful to me, I remember the feelings of safety—the encouragement to be completely honest, curious, even angry, in my writing and discourse with like- and other-minded people. I remember the content becoming increasingly more relevant to my personal and professional roles in the world for the first time in my academic lifetime. The opportunity to have hard feelings and complicated conversations about race, ethnicity, difference, and socially constructed systems, made a difference in how I saw myself and others with less judgement and more compassion. The ability to hear about people's experiences and have them listen to mine, created an opportunity for meaning making and an understanding that went beyond intellectualization.

I have experienced how safe classrooms must include (a) naming and acknowledging emotions, (b) sharing personal challenges and fears when appropriate, (c) actively participating in classroom conversations, and (d) helping create a classroom environment where honest and respectful conversations about race and a variety of beliefs can occur (Sue et al., 2009). *Currere* offers students and instructors opportunities to deeply reflect as individuals and openly listen to multiple experiences of race, ethnicity, and social norms; research supports such experiences (Chan et al., 2018; Matthews et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2017).

My Meaning

I was not a fan of student anger, especially when it was towards me, other students, or documented on class evaluations, and I am learning from these experiences. That ongoing professional reflection that I posited as essential for educators in this field was and is occurring (Garza-Fraire & Stark, 2023). With each turn, I have had an opportunity to continue my *currere* reflections, toss in new social context, and produce new practices for the application of *currere* in and outside of the classroom. From my ongoing reflections and conversations, I recognize the

importance of not missing a learning opportunity due to the inability to have complex conversations but, rather. centering the learning opportunities around the ideas and conversations of those in the classroom.

Intentional reflective critical pedagogy, like *currere*, became essential when the post-electoral diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) language and narrative was silenced. Our work as diversity researchers and educators came under inspection, and many of our students are questioning course work that appears to be within the vein of DEI or aligns with antiracist language. Yet, our work is ongoing and must be framed in a way that still holds value and meaning for our learners and stakeholders. More importantly, our work as educators cannot get shut down for holding an agenda that may have begun to exist. Critical pedagogy resists the idea of agendas in education. The goal of education is not to tell students what to think but to help them become more aware, thoughtful, and engaged participants in a diverse and complex world (Freire, 1968/2000; Pinar, 2011, 2012; Pinar & Grumet, 2015; Ratts et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2009).

As a result of my *currere* practice and reflection, I sought to make some changes in how we structured our *Counseling Diverse Populations* course. The graduate counseling department and leadership agreed to get rid of the existing textbook while keeping the guiding educational and professional and ethical standards for the course that serve and preserve the dignity of all students and their future clients.

Instead of having the content delivered by a textbook, students are (1) reflecting on personal socio-cultural and racialized experiences, (2) analyzing course content and professional competencies, (3) having conversations with one another, (4) and making meaning of the research and concepts surrounding cultural humility within the context of becoming counseling professionals to people from a multitude of backgrounds with unique experiences. It's important to note that the removal of the textbook was not to appease students but to responsively remove potential barriers to learning and create an opportunity for student collaboration and exploration. Brené Brown (2018), researcher and social work educator, identifies shame, perfectionism, and control as barriers to learning; meanwhile, curiosity, connection, and vulnerability lead to growth and grounded confidence. Experiential learning and qualitative research taught me that learning in a safe and challenging environment helps build self-awareness and cultural humility and has fostered curiosity for learning more.

As I reflect on the value of the ongoing process of *currere*, I am reminded that prioritizing the students' lived experiences within the curriculum improves learning (Pinar & Grumet, 2015). *Currere*, in Latin, means the running of the course, "wherein curriculum is experienced, enacted, and reconstructed" (Pinar & Grumet, 2015,p. 1). In other words, curriculum is to "the racetrack" as *currere* is to "the running of the race" (Pinar, 1975, 1994). Today, I better understand the progressive tense of curriculum building and the ongoing reflection that it requires for the educator committed to responsive learning spaces and ongoing conversations with students.

UNTIL NEXT TIME

It is too soon to know what the outcomes might be for the students, but I know that as a counselor educator and clinician this ongoing *currere* conversation is holding me accountable to the dynamic sociopolitical climate, the needs of students, and the needs of the people they will serve. This ongoing work includes reflexive observations of my experiences and contributions to

the ongoing narrative of diversity related education. Because of *currere* and this accountability, the conversations will continue.

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