

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Addressing the problem of the lack of safe spaces for urban adolescent girls to build self-esteem and explore identity requires a review of the literature on the subjects that provide the rationale for this project. An explanation of this chapter's organization follows. First, the theoretical orientation of this project is explored. Then, this chapter analyzes the literature that informs this intervention with a three-pronged focus: 1) the use of bibliotherapy and book clubs with urban girls; 2) group counseling with urban girls; and 3) self-esteem and identity development in urban girls. Next, a summary provides an overview of the key research findings. Finally, a conclusion explains how the research reviewed in this chapter informs the project description that follows in the next chapter.

Theory/Rationale

School counselors deliver comprehensive counseling programs that provide interventions to vulnerable populations in the pursuit of equity. Urban adolescents face myriad threats at home and in their communities that threaten their social/emotional well-being (Dell-Angelo, 2016; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011). In school, urban girls of color also face microaggressions and systemic oppression, which further marginalizes them (Fisher et al., 2000; Huynh, 2012). Interventions aimed at bolstering these students' self-esteem and sense of identity, like all interventions, must be grounded in theory. This examination is approached from two theoretical frameworks: relational-cultural theory (RCT) and critical race theory (CRT). Both relate directly to the focus of the research.

Relational-Cultural Theory

Miller (1976) posited in her seminal work on RCT that fostering positive relationships between clients should be the primary goal of group counseling, as opposed to individuation. This theory, which arose out of feminist and multicultural theories, “places strong emphasis on the role of culture and oppression on the development and psychology of women” (Tucker, Smith-Adcock, & Trepal, 2011, p. 311). Per Tucker, Smith-Adcock, and Trepal (2011), “mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are central in RCT” (p. 311). Miller (1986) illuminated “five good things” (p. 2) that are characteristics of growth-fostering relationships, including:

Each person feels a greater sense of ‘zest’ (vitality, energy); each person feels more able to act and does act; each person has a more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s); each person feels a greater sense of worth; [and] each person feels more connected to the other person(s) and feels a greater motivation for connections with other people beyond those in the specific relationship. (p. 3)

Relational-cultural therapy is an increasingly prevalent method of helping minority populations examine their place within the dominant culture and how they can respond to it in a way that brings about growth and empowerment (Tucker et al., 2011). Effectively, RCT is predicated on the notion that “individuals approach optimal development while participating in relationships characterized by authenticity, relational connection, mutuality, and engagement” (Lenz, 2016, p. 415).

Because urban adolescent girls of color have “multiple social identities” (Walker, 2002, p. 2), they are oppressed by the dominant culture in multiple ways. RCT is an appropriate theory from which to work because it “focuses on the role of power in

relationships and strategies of relating” (Tucker et al., 2011, p. 311) to the majority culture, and it also helps individuals embrace the various facets of their identity within the majority culture. Tucker et al. (2011) outlined five activities used by school counselors who have adopted RCT as their theoretical orientation:

1. encourage (self-empathy, or self-acceptance without blame)...;
2. explore students’ relational images;
3. educate students about power;
4. explain disconnections (routine, cultural/societal, and traumatic) and conflict;
5. expand students’ relational capacities. (p. 312)

These practices are particularly useful in small group counseling because of the relationship-oriented nature of both that setting and RCT. Comstock et al. (2008) argued that RCT is powerful when used as a framework from which to amplify marginalized voices and is “the best way to strategically confront and challenge crippling stereotypes, various forms of internalized dominance and oppression, negative relational and controlling images, and other disempowering forces in society” (p. 286).

Critical Race Theory

CRT originated in legal scholarship by, among others, Crenshaw (1989) and Bell (1995). CRT is predicated on the assumptions that: “race is a social construction, race permeates all aspects of social life, and race-based ideology is threaded throughout society” (Ortiz & Jani, 2010, p. 176). CRT is not merely applied to examinations of literature or the law, but also calls for societal changes via dialogue (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). Ortiz and Jani (2010) posited that CRT is not only a theory but is “a way of thinking and being in the world” (p. 176). CRT gives voice to the silenced members of society and allows for intersectional examinations of marginalized groups. Lopez and Chesney-Lind

(2014) explained that CRT “acknowledges and validates the important role of people’s shared experiences – as filtered through classism, racism and sexism – in influencing how they view the world as well as how they see themselves in relation to others around them” (p. 530). Furthermore, CRT illuminates the reality that people of color frequently experience microaggressions that are subtle enough that those of the majority race do not even notice them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT accepts that race and individual narratives matter and deserve acknowledgement, and that racism is ordinary, as opposed to being an aberration, because it is institutionalized in all aspects of society, including law, education, public discourse, entertainment, and more. Importantly, CRT is highly critical of the notion of colorblindness, the idea that race does not matter, as it denies the narratives of people of color and deprives them of bringing their voices into public discourse.

Intersectionality is an aspect of CRT. Crenshaw (1989), in her seminal work on intersectionality, stated that “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which... [women of color] are subordinated” (p. 140). After all, an African American high school student is not singly African American, nor is she singly a girl. She belongs to a social class, has a sexual orientation, might be differently-abled, may practice a marginalized religion, and more. Collins (2015) defined intersectionality broadly as the idea that “race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (p. 2). CRT provides a framework from which to examine the ways that race interacts with

other facets of identity, such as gender and sexual orientation; thus, CRT and intersectionality are intrinsically linked.

Bell (1995) argued that most people whose practices are informed by CRT are “existentially people of color ideologically committed to the struggle against racism” and that those who are White “are cognizant of and committed to the overthrow of their own racial privilege” (p. 898). Therefore, school counselors whose work with students is informed by CRT engage in social justice advocacy. Within school, “counselors are in a unique position to foster communication about racial issues” (Benedetto & Olinsky, 2001, p. 68). More specifically, Holcomb-McCoy (2005) stressed that it is imperative that counselors address ethnic identity and its role in students’ development. For counselors to do this, they must understand institutionalized racism and the way that race interacts with other facets of identity, so CRT is a fitting theoretical framework for school counseling interventions for urban students of color.

Research/Evaluation

The research analyzed in this section focuses on the uses of bibliotherapy and small group counseling with adolescent girls of color, as well as the impact of self-esteem and identity development on the social/emotional well-being of adolescent girls of color. Each of these subject areas is vital to the reasoning behind the project components that are detailed in Chapter Three, and the Appendices.

Bibliotherapy and Book Clubs

Bibliotherapy has been used by counselors for over 100 years, though in the past 30 years, it been used more prevalently due to evidence that shows its effectiveness in bringing positive changes to clients. Pehrsson and McMillen (2010) found after examining reviews of the literature over many years that bibliotherapy used with adults