

**Protest Demonstrations in 2020:
A Viewpoint from the Field on
Social Justice, Multiculturalism, and Death**

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Abstract

The author of this viewpoint article, who is both a counseling professional and a police officer, was in extremely close proximity to multiple social justice themed demonstrations in their entirety during the spring, summer, and fall of 2020. In this viewpoint, he shares these experiences; discusses themes which emerged related to social justice/multicultural counseling and counselor education, decolonization, and the existential event of death; and draws connections with the extant human services literature. Implications are suggested for professional human services practice as well as further research into the phenomena of social justice demonstrations and counseling.

Keywords: demonstration, social justice, multicultural, existential, death

Introduction

I am a Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC), a doctoral student in a Counselor Education Program, and a police officer. In the spring, summer, and fall of 2020, I was assigned to a law enforcement detail responsible for ensuring the safety of demonstrators and protection of property within an urban setting. The demonstrations ranged in their social justice efforts and messages: racial equity, equitable justice under the law for victims/survivors/suspects, against police brutality, decolonizing our society, against police existence, in support of or against public health orders amid COVID-19, and in support or defiance of certain political parties. The demonstrators marched, blocked roadways, made speeches via public address systems, played music, gathered together, and showed coordinated efforts among organizations to demonstrate the need for social justice reforms and equity.

During Spring 2020, the demonstrations were mostly peaceful; however, violence increased as summer neared. Gun violence, physical violence, and property damage seemed to increase dramatically surrounding some demonstrations I observed. Different demonstrator and organizational groups began to clash or intrude on the space of one another. Some demonstrators and police officers sustained life-threatening injuries. Some demonstrators and police officers died in locations throughout the United States during these events: as many as 19 individuals died in relation to demonstration events during a 2-week period (McEvoy, 2020). I began to consider how demonstrators, and those who took oaths to advocate (e.g., counselors) or protect (e.g., police), were literally risking death to demonstrate the importance of their social justice beliefs when attending different events. It seemed an increased probability, or presence, of possible death existed at every demonstration for everyone at the event.



The demonstrators were representative of the oppressed; they sought “freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (Freire, 2018, p. 44). That is, it is human to know the birthright of equity; yet, the struggle to regain this lost birthright might paradoxically involve death. Large public demonstrations of a strong connection to a topic are impactful, and the life altering risks associated with being part of an impactful moment can be lasting in both positive and negative ways. Voices, ideas, thoughts, and actions collaborating become a force in need of recognition. In contrast, voices, ideas, thoughts, and actions collaborating can become a target of misunderstood, misdirected, negligent, ignorant, inhumane, or otherwise wrongful violence.

Viewing the events from the differing lenses of a counselor, counselor educator, and police officer developed within me an internal complexity, or a fight for congruence, which I had never previously experienced so strongly. Experiences within these multiple professional worlds, in combination with my observations of demonstrations, led me to consider themes of intersectionality, or the relationships between structures engulfed in oppression (Weldon, 2008). Feelings of being caught professionally between opposing worlds in relation to my own natural way of being seemed to develop: one professionally congruent world that enriches my life and a separate incongruent professional world highly influenced publicly by what society might expect of me. As a counselor, my work involves building therapeutic alliances based on empathy with an individual, couple, or group to help reach the goals of that person or group. As a counselor educator and doctoral student, my scholarship, creative work, research activity, teaching, and practice is intentionally focused on making a significant impact in the areas of decolonization, social justice, and multiculturalism as they relate to counseling and academia. As a police officer, my work involves building just enough rapport to safely and fairly apply societal or investigative objectives on someone or some group while existing within the boundaries of the United States Constitution.

Considering the meaning of my experiences as an observer in extremely close proximity to these demonstrations became my task. What could these observations and experiences mean for my practice as a counselor, counselor educator, or police officer? How could I even begin to make meaning of my observations? In what ways could I put this meaning into social justice praxis? The purpose of this article is to dissect field experiences as a demonstration observer as they relate to meaning-making about social justice, multicultural counseling, counselor education, decolonization, and the existential event of death.

Context: Extant Literature and Definitions

Demonstration

It seems important to define demonstrations as accurately as possible. The term, “demonstration,” seems equally as colonized as other similar terms used to describe the above-mentioned events in 2020: protests, civil disturbances, disturbances, civil unrest, riots, parties, uprisings, and so forth. The use of each of these terms depends on the time, space, and lens of the term’s user. Furthermore, each term used to describe this gathering of people carries a negative or positive connotation. That is, labeling a gathering of people as a *riot* might bring to mind images of chaos; however, calling the gathering a *disturbance* or *demonstration* might create images of organized public disputes. Similarly, most of these colonized terms carry inherent connotations of the gathering group as being “against” something or someone, instead of “for” something or someone. Mitchell (2020) provides a simple, accurate description of “engagement,” which also seems to fit as a more decolonized,



working definition for demonstration: “creating a space to draw attention to issues arising and to explore new ideas” (p. 61).

Social Justice/Multicultural Counseling Perspectives: Death, Meaning-Making, & Meaning Seeking

It is important to accurately describe Social Justice/Multicultural (SJ/MC) counseling and counselor education. What is social justice? It is a philosophy, it is a theory, and it is an action. It is a way of being, a space in which to live, a space to strive toward. Social justice is an integral component of counseling practice, supervision, academia, and leadership. The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) defines social justice as “the promotion of equity for all people and groups for the purpose of ending oppression and injustice affecting clients, students, counselors, families, communities, schools, workplaces, governments and other social and institutional systems (p. 21).” Courtland Lee (2007) provides a slightly more clarifying description of social justice in relation to counseling: “promoting access and equity to ensure full participation in the life of a society, particularly for those who have been systematically excluded” (p. 1). Social justice calls counselors, counselor supervisors, and counselor educators to praxis: thoughts become actions, and actions invoke change for the oppressed, marginalized, or excluded (Chavez et al., 2016).

Multiculturalism and social justice are not mutually exclusive. To promote equity, end oppression, and engage in meaningful praxis, the way of being with clients, students, and supervisees must be jointly explored within individual contexts. Again, turning to the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), multicultural counseling “recognizes diversity and embraces approaches that support worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of the individuals within their historical, cultural, economic, political, and psychosocial contexts (p. 20).” Hook et al. (2017) further describe a multicultural orientation as a counselor to be culturally humble, culturally comfortable, and acting meaningfully regarding cultural opportunities.

SJ/MC counseling and counselor education encompasses a constant striving toward these ways of thinking, being, acting, and transforming within the context of students, clients, and supervisees. Paulo Freire’s (2018) description of a “cultural invasion” represents the war that SJ/MC counselors and counselor educators are continually fighting and the similar war demonstrators fight:

In this phenomenon, the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter’s potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression...cultural invasion is thus always an act of violence against the persons of the invaded culture. (p. 152)

Death is seemingly entangled within SJ/MC practice. Cultural acts of violence against persons evidence the importance, fragility, and ultimately possible life-taking elements of oppressed cultural orientation. Individuals dying during social justice themed demonstrations, whether they be police or civilian, suffer the ultimate act of violence. Do not some individuals die through/from oppression, lack of equal access to resources, injustices, or by other means at the hands of the dominant group in that moment? Does not his or her death carry meaning related to the culture of the oppressed and oppressors overall? Does he or she not perceive the existential event of his or her death as meaningful within a SJ/MC orientation?



Decolonizing in Counseling and Police Work: Praxis as the Next Step Toward Meaning-Making

In roles as educators, counselors, and law enforcement, there exists a responsibility to be action-oriented and not stagnant in our understanding and praxis involving decolonization (Lewis et al., 2011). It is important to first consider what is meant by the “colonization” of an individual, group, or community. Hernandez and McDowell (2010) provide a good working definition for colonialism: “the promotion of dominant group (i.e., colonizer) ideologies, beliefs, and cultural practices for the purpose of maintaining centered positions of cultural, social, and economic capital” (p. 30). At a macro level, it seems ways of policing communities, proactively planning or reacting to demonstrations, and communicating with community members could all be colonized processes. The acts of using certain tactics to enforce certain laws, monitor demonstrations, or the ways in which police choose or do not choose to interact with the community might all be representative of the dominant group’s values. If we strip policing and community relations to their core, we are left with acts of helping, acts of humanism, and acts of collaboration. In addition, if we strip academia and counseling to their core, we are left with acts of learning, acts of helping, and acts of belonging.

These values seem more indigenized and decolonized; helping, humanism, collaborating, learning, helping, and belonging are universal phenomena able to be cross-culturally applied to most groups historically. Focusing work on these indigenized concepts and less on colonized ways of knowing is a general way to begin decolonization of these spaces. As both a counselor and a police officer, social justice seems a large part of my identity as a counselor and counselor educator, but why can it not also exist as a large part of my identity as a police officer? Making more presence for social justice advocacy and leadership in my role as a police officer has emerged as a new endeavor.

Decolonization is focused on how to live, or how to create a way of living, learning, counseling, supervising, or teaching. Cultural humility also considers constant self-analysis of present awareness, combined with a deeper knowledge of individual origins. By focusing on how to live in the present, how one has lived in the past, or how one can exist in a more decolonized way in the future, we inherently move away from, avoid, or do not consider the space surrounding the existential event of death. Yet, how can we consider living without contemplating death?

Existential Therapy Embodies SJ/MC and Decolonizing Themes With Room for Death Meaning

Regardless of the represented cause, the existential event of death knows no difference between oppressors or oppressed. Yet, a contradiction does exist. Demonstrations of the oppressed represent how “our need to belong is powerful and fundamental: we have always lived in groups with intense and persistent relationships among members” (Yalom, 2009, p. 143). That is, demonstrations provide a tangible sense of unification of the oppressed against oppression. However, to die is to experience a seemingly lonely event; death separates individuals from people, but also separates individuals from the world (Yalom, 2009). So, although demonstrations provide a powerful sense of belonging and unification, they also present the opportunity to experience a seemingly lonely event in death.

Corey (2009) describes the development of existential therapy as a way to address people’s perceived “isolation, alienation, and meaninglessness” (p. 134). Coincidentally, these three terms also encompass the perceptions of the oppressed, or demonstrators. Performing a social justice themed demonstration counteracts isolation, alienation, and



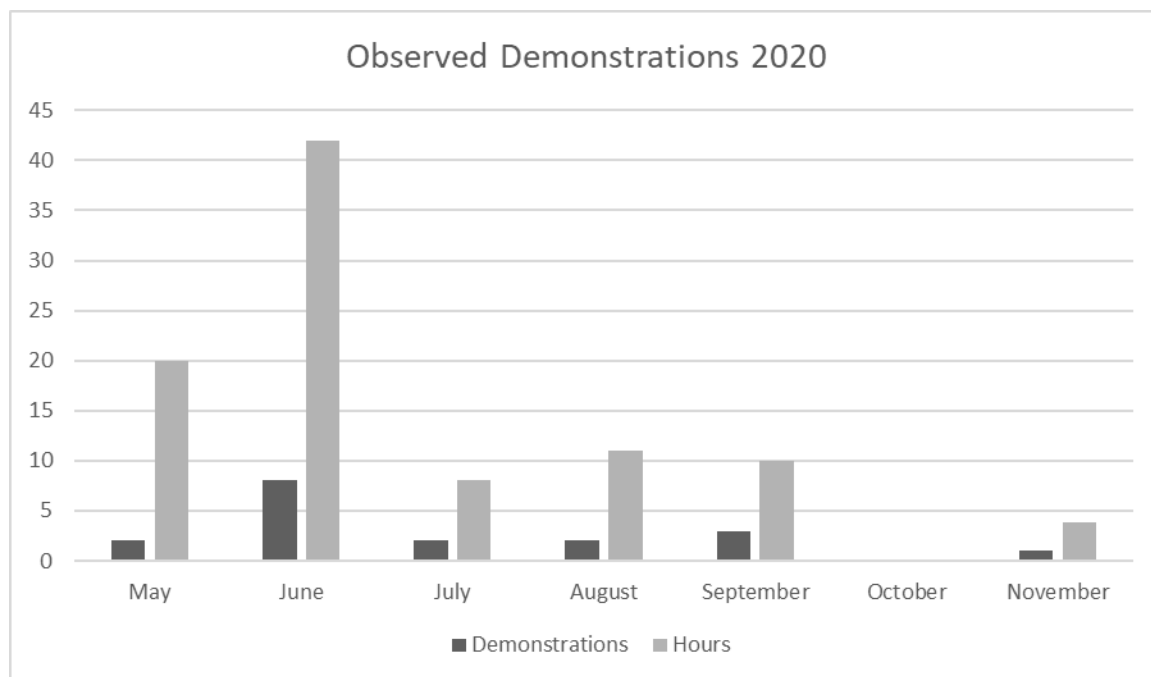
meaninglessness with togetherness, closeness, and purpose. That is, SJ/MC actions and existential therapy are in some ways comparable in addressing life's issues. The concepts of existential therapy include focusing on an individual's internal abilities to become self-aware, freely and responsibly make choices, find meaningfulness/purpose in life, frame anxiety as a normal lived experience, and consider death or not existing (Corey, 2009). These same concepts describe the lived experience of demonstrators, based on my observations.

From the Field Experience

Specifically, I observed 18 separate demonstrations in close proximity from May–November 2020 for a total of 94.82 hours of observations. The longest demonstration lasted approximately 12 hours, while the shortest was approximately 2 hours, with 5.27 hours being the average time a demonstration lasted. I observed the most hours of demonstrations (42), and the most separate demonstration events (8) in June 2020. The observed demonstrations were made up of both people and vehicles (see Figure 1). They were mixed in appearance as both static and mobile. Some of the demonstrations did not result in any property damage or injury, while others resulted in severe observed property damage and injury. In the sections that follow, I discuss three unique reflections/descriptions of demonstrations I observed (Readers should note that the descriptions that follow reflect contemporaneous accounts. An attempt was made to retain the tone and meaning of these accounts.)

Figure 1

Observed Demonstrations 2020



Demonstration 1



There is another demonstration today. The demonstrators are many; at first 20, then 50, then hundreds. They cover the entire road for multiple city blocks. Vehicle traffic cannot pass. Their marches begin when it's light out and continue well into the darkness of night. They use megaphones and public address systems to deliver multiple speeches when they stop at some intersections throughout their march. Some demonstrators are openly armed with firearms; it's unknown if they are exercising Second Amendment rights, or preparing for defense/protection, or are planning an offensive engagement. Some demonstrators have duct taped crosses on their backpacks signifying sources of medical attention, which evidences a perceived need to provide immediate medical attention to injured individuals. Some demonstrators have gas masks, which evidences an anticipation of breathing difficulties if faced with gas munitions. Hundreds march for hours with no observable sign of violence, and only slight property damage.

Time is lost; at some point things became darker and colder. There are now streetlights on and traffic signals are bright against the dark sky. There is a shift in energy from organized strength to unexpected, unchallengeable, and split chaos. Different groups of demonstrators, and new arriving individuals with conflicting perspectives, are present in the same time and space. Help is requested. Multiple gunshots are heard, but the shooter's location cannot be narrowed down. People run, then stop, then return to walking and eventually their previous pace as if gun shots had not occurred. Vehicle tires squeal against the pavement. People can be seen smashing windows with metal rods. People can be seen climbing light posts and kicking off traffic signals and lights. People can be seen breaking storefront windows and doors followed by entering the buildings and occupying them in large numbers. People are seen taking items from the buildings they enter. Dumpsters are set on fire and rolled into the street. A separate stationary fire is burning in an intersection. People surround the intersection fire as if at a campsite and are seen throwing unknown items into the flames to fuel its impact.

Chaos becomes normal. Abnormal observations become normal observations. Uniformed police arrive in the area. It is early morning now, but still no daylight has arrived. Small groups of individuals break off from the larger group. The smaller groups are breaking windows and doors at different locations around the demonstration. Life is in danger of being lost by many, and by me. Perceived control is lost. I leave the area. The experience is over for now.

Demonstration 2

There is another demonstration today. We are exhausted. My family life is strained. I wonder what good it does to protect others who don't want "protection," while at the same time damaging the bonds within my own immediate family. Today's gathering is different. There are hundreds, but no one is visibly armed with guns. There are families, couples, and young children all gathering together. While megaphones blast important messages, there is no property damage, and I don't feel the extreme presence of danger today. The energy of the masses communicates calmness, concern, togetherness, purpose. Community leaders are here from many groups. There is a short march; yet, no traffic is blocked and the demonstrators stay on the sidewalk. I wonder of the unseen threats capable of changing the course of these peaceful lives: counter-protestors and agitators. Yet, no credible threat presents itself today. The experience is over for now.

Demonstration 3



There is another demonstration today. Words like celebration, get-together, community event, or social gathering seem to better define my observations. Families, groups, children, adults, elderly are all gathered together with music, food, and performances. There is no marching, no damage to property, and no speeches. There are signs, and the theme of the event as a celebration, or encouragement, of race equity is clear. As a counselor, I see the best of humanity. As a police officer, I worry the group is exposed to possible outside threats, and I consider my abilities to protect them should a threat present itself. The experience is over for now.

Implications for the Author

“I think I will have to learn to deal with the strain about doing the things that will enrich my life instead of the things society may expect of me” (Yalom, 2009). Following these described experiences, I also felt praxis was missing in my role as an SJ/MC counselor and counselor educator. In an attempt to fill this praxis void, I consulted with my agency regarding the creation of a social justice advocacy position within law enforcement. My proposal was met with positive regard, and currently the formation of that position is being considered. Furthermore, I transferred from my role as an enforcement-oriented position within the agency and became part of a team focused on providing decolonized approaches to violence intervention.

Discussion

Referring to the aforementioned decolonized definition of an engagement, the individuals and vehicles in the demonstrations I observed did seem to create their own space in time and place to bring attention toward social justice issues in different manners. The individuals involved in Demonstration 1 created a significantly large mass of people and vehicles, completely overtook streets, caused severe property damage, and presented multiple deadly threats: mobile/stationary fires, gunfire, and so forth. Their ability to draw attention to issues based on their actions is undeniably robust, and during their march they stopped at multiple locations to conduct speeches and explore new ideas. Both Demonstrations 2 and 3 shared the following features: large crowds, no traffic blocked, multiple speeches/messages, and the presence of known community leaders and families. These demonstrations seemed to effectively combine the characteristics of creating a unique space to bring important focus to social justice issues, yet they also provided space for an exploration of new ideas: the time allotted to speeches, messages, and togetherness surrounding ideas related to the issues represented was significant. It seemed more of a combination of presenting problems and brainstorming solutions for change, while providing less physically threatening phenomenon.

Regarding SJ/MC counseling perspectives, all three demonstrations provided unique examples of meaning-making and meaning seeking. Demonstration 1 appeared to encompass themes of race equity, defunding police, and equal justice. Demonstration 1 also directly relates to Freire’s work: the culture of the masses was violently invaded, and a violent revolt ensued; the colonized individuals demonstrated some characteristics (threats of life/destruction) of the original colonizers. That is, the original colonizers used force, damage, threats, fear, and coercion, and the individuals in Demonstration 1 also seemed to create a similar atmosphere with deadly threats and property damage. Demonstration 2 appeared to also contain themes of race equity, but there was a general theme of trying to find peaceful approaches to change. Organization, leadership, and an intentional approach to not creating a space for harm seemed prevalent. In Demonstration 2 the organizers even seemed to designate the flow of traffic around the gathering. Social justice themes of Demonstration 3



also included race equity, but the theme was presented as more of a celebration of a specific race. It appears all three demonstrations included the theme of race equity as meaningful; yet, all three demonstrations brought attention to race equity in different manners.

Decolonization and social justice praxis were dimensions of each demonstration. Reducing academia, policing, community relations, and counseling to decolonized acts, we are left with spaces for helping, humanism, collaboration, learning and belonging. Although all three demonstrations exhibited differences, they all displayed praxis of these decolonized themes. Speeches, messages, marching, organizing, and coming together as a single, visible mass are all ways of transforming the ideas of helping, humanism, collaboration, learning, and belonging into social justice practice.

Finally, the existential event of death appeared prevalent in all three demonstrations. That is, being exposed to the possibility of harm, or death, seemed of heightened circumstance at all three demonstrations. In Demonstration 1, the individuals played a large role in creating a space capable of overtly endangering the lives of individuals: gun shots, fires, weapons, and damaged property were all present. Furthermore, by providing their own designated medical response from the beginning of the demonstration, it seemed as though individuals accepted, planned for, and addressed the probability of physical harm. In Demonstrations 2 and 3, although the involved individuals themselves did not actively create a space capable of presenting increased danger or death, it seemed simply by organizing highly visible demonstrations the individuals were providing an opportunity for harm. Anti-protestors, agitators, and groups with opposing views might have seen opportunities for conflict with visible displays of meaning and exploration of new ideas by the demonstrators. Although the threats to life of Demonstrations 2 and 3 were not as concrete, visible, and present as in Demonstration 1, there still existed an increased opportunity for harm or death.

Human Services Implications for Counseling Educators, Counseling Professionals, and Police Personnel

Social justice, multiculturalism, and decolonization are extremely impactful concepts to incorporate into work as counselor educators, counselors, and police officers. Hook et al. (2016) describes how a constant self-exploration of cultural humility can lead to a constant assessment of experienced power imbalances. This developed cultural humility would lead to the re-analysis of power dynamics during interactions and, in turn, address the decolonization of our roles, which could lead to the larger decolonization of experiences within the institutions of academia, counseling, and law enforcement. As educators, counselors, and police officers it is important to consider the decolonized nature of our roles: helpers. Techniques, modalities, and policies might govern our approach in a colonized manner from the words we use, spaces we occupy, and actions we take. However, using the decolonized lens to view ourselves simply as helpers re-focuses our never-changing goal to build helping relationships with others.

Furthermore, it seems the existential experience of death and life's meaning are enmeshed within counselor education, counseling, and police work. As counselor educators, we help students find purpose, or meaning, through education and experiences within counseling. In counseling, our focus is forming a helping relationship with a client to reach his or her life's goals, or (in contrast), address his or her thoughts around death. In both counselor education and counseling, we act as advocates for social justice and equity. As a police officer, dealing with life and death situations, crisis, and the consideration of life's meaning or purpose seems almost omnipresent. Seemingly, all three professional roles are intertwined around these themes. Perhaps creating spaces for further connection between



other individuals in the roles of counselor educator, counselor, and law enforcement outside of myself would be an effective praxis, building empathy and bridging helping professions for the overall betterment of our communities.

There are multiple, specific ways both counselor educators and counselors can weave social justice leadership into learning spaces and practice. Presenting readings, followed by guided discussions around oppression, the oppressed, and oppressors (e.g., Freire) provides insight into the historical effects of trauma and oppression on today's population. Providing opportunities for culturally immersive experiential events, such as a guest speaker's panel, can also be helpful in building empathy about others' unique identities. Finally, incorporating liberation psychology into counseling practice can help our clients to explore social justice praxis (Chavez et al., 2016).

Implications for Further Human Services Research

As evidenced by my descriptions of sometimes present injuries, deaths, and unpredictability of some demonstrations, working as an observer, researcher, or acting as a participant/observer could pose some safety concerns for future research. Intentional selection of pre-planned demonstrations organized with pre-existing and accessible plans of action might be applicable. For example, some demonstrations originate spontaneously, while others are planned well in advance, with notification and request for participation. Further literature review or quantitative research into the amount/type of demonstrations geographically in comparison to demonstration related injuries/deaths would also be helpful. Documenting observations in real time to provide a source of data would be an initial step in the development of a qualitative phenomenological study.

Final Thoughts

Human services describe a vast field of professionals, including police, counselors, and counselor educators, who can effectively help clients, students, peer populations, organizations, and communities at all levels. Sharing information, perspectives, and experiences also encourages human services professionals to grow through increased awareness across fields, while strengthening connections between people and the understanding of extant literature. Social justice themed demonstrations in 2020 might have affected many human services professionals in limitless ways. Searching for meaning in the visible efforts, strong voices, collaborative ideas, and risks taken by so many demonstrators creates an opportunity for personal and professional growth within the considerations of social justice, multiculturalism, decolonization, and existentialism.

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