“Treat Me Like a Dumb American”: a Qualitative Exploration of the American Immigrant Counselor Experience

Holly Marie Smith1,2 · Nina Martin1

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Abstract
This qualitative study addresses the gap in the limited literature on the experiences of American immigrant counselors practicing overseas. Seven American immigrant counselors were interviewed regarding their experience. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using inductive Thematic Analysis. Three themes were identified: lack of cultural knowledge as counseling technique, American stereotypes/politics within the counseling session, and issues surrounding lack of counseling regulation and transfer of professional credentials. Implications for American counselor education are discussed.

Keywords Immigrant counselor · Counselor education · Qualitative · International counseling · Expat counselor

Introduction
The American Counseling Association (ACA) provides an ethical framework for American-trained counselors to practice within. The ACA Code of Ethics calls for multicultural competency, defined as, “counselors’ cultural and diversity awareness and knowledge about self and others, and how this awareness and knowledge are applied effectively in practice with clients and client groups” (ACA, 2014, p. 20), in several areas: confidentiality/privacy, boundaries of competence, assessment, supervision, disability and infusion of multicultural materials into counselor education. The framework highlights the importance of multicultural competency; however, little emphasis is placed on investigating the experiences of counselors who are practicing outside the United States and living the multicultural counseling experience. What constitutes “multicultural” seems to be largely made up of ethnic and diversity
issues as far as the United States is concerned (Dietz & Baker, 2019). While some efforts are made to increase the cultural competence of student counselors, the mode of exposure is via study abroad programs (Canfield et al., 2009; Dietz & Baker, 2019; Jurgens & McAuliffe, 2004), which provide only time-limited immersion in a different culture.

While there are no statistics available on the number of American counselors working outside the United States, only 42% of Americans held passports as of 2019 (U.S. Department of State, 2020). These figures suggest that experience gained while studying abroad may be critical to enhancing the world-view of a new counselor. To date, there appears to be little evidence of counseling programs which encourage counseling abroad or that help inform best practice for counselors who already are. The issue of internationalization in counseling has been addressed via the use of checklists for American counseling programs who wish to add more international components to their programs, including international training (Leong & Ponterotto, 2003; Marsella & Pedersen, 2004; Ng et al., 2012). However, the American counseling field has not, to date, examined this issue in depth (Ng et al., 2012).

In line with the ACA’s (2014) definition of multicultural competency, with regards to the awareness of self, the counselor’s self is thought to be an “inevitable presence” (Reupert, 2006, p. 95) in that one’s own personality, beliefs, values, and other things that make up an individual are always present in counseling sessions. In previous attempts to match successful therapeutic outcomes with certain counselor traits (including age, gender, in addition to personality), there is only some evidence for retaining clients, rather than effective or successful counseling (Beutler et al., 1994). Other factors such as training and experience have also been examined as predictors of successful outcomes in counseling (Reupert, 2006). Numerous studies have found little connecting higher levels of counseling profession and training to better therapeutic outcomes (Atkins & Christensen, 2001; Berman & Norton, 1985; Durlak, 1979; Hattie et al., 1984; Stein & Lambert, 1995). Theoretical orientation and specific counseling techniques are also thought not to matter in terms of effectiveness, with an understanding that any type of counseling is better than no counseling (Reupert, 2006).

In considering the importance placed on the counselor’s self, what does it mean for the immigrant counselor, who may not be totally aware of how “the self” is perceived by those in the dominant culture (Lidchi, 2002)? The importance of reflexivity as it relates to counseling is critical for all counselors, in considering what effect the counselor’s self has on the counseling process. However, when operating as the immigrant, this presents an obvious challenge to foreign-born counselors, who genuinely may not know (Barreto, 2013; Lidchi, 2002). Lidchi presented the following considerations for outsider counselors, “(1) consideration of the represented identity of the therapist, (2) recognition of, and adaptation to, the expectation of the therapy process, (3) getting to know the cultural beliefs and customs that inform family behavior” (2002, p. 158). It is important to note that Lidchi is a European counselor working in Bolivia and may not experience the same variations in identity representations as Americans overseas.

The limited amount of literature regarding immigrant counselors referenced the ability of the immigrant counselor to question more freely, and with genuine
curiosity, that a counselor from the same cultural background might not be able to with the same honesty (Isaacson, 2002; Kissil et al., 2013; Morris & Lee, 2004). In particular, the need for clients to explain slang or cultural terms can also prompt the client to have a realization they may not otherwise have had. Some researchers position this as a challenge to immigrant counselors, warning that they may miss alternate meanings of words, nuances in language, or other small differences that could change client meaning (Akhtar, 2006). Conversely, the need for the client to explain unfamiliar terms to the immigrant counselor is also thought to have therapeutic utility, in that it may cause the client to further examine their experience by having to explain the meaning of their words (Kissil et al., 2013).

Further to this idea is the positioning of the immigrant counselor as “the not knower” (Barreto, 2013, p. 352). Being aware of, and accepting limitations, lets the counselor take on the uncommon position of not knowing things (Barreto, 2013). The uncertain feelings experienced by the immigrant counselor in session can be utilized by creating an environment where the client is more engaged in the process (Barreto, 2013). What is not known is the application of this concept to American counselors practicing abroad. Barreto (2013) and other researchers focused on the experience of foreign counselors to the United States or Canada (Akyil, 2011; Chen, 2004; Kissil et al., 2013; Mittal & Wieling, 2006). While they differ in terms of Western versus non-Western participants and specific type of helping profession, if or how these same therapeutic utilities or limitations apply to American counselors is not known. Immigrant counselors and counselor trainees to the United States reported experiencing prejudice based on skin color, accent, and being a foreigner (Kissil et al., 2012). While there may be shared experiences and universalities of all immigrants, the experience of White counselors from the United States working internationally is unlikely to mirror the experience of non-White immigrant counselors to the United States.

Questions remain concerning the intersection of identities with White North American counselors working abroad. Ratts et al. (2016) Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies used quadrants to illustrate the intersection between marginalized counselors/clients and privileged counselors/clients. In the case of North American counselors, some may be privileged in their ability to immigrate by choice, but still marginalized because of the perceptions of Americans in some cultures, for example. Within each quadrant, the concept of counselor self-awareness is present (Ratts et al., 2016), but even experienced counselors may lose some of their self-awareness as they adjust to a new culture. Further work is needed in this area to appropriately be able to apply current multicultural and social justice counseling competencies to counselors working internationally.

Considerable research and recommendations for best practice for multicultural and cross-cultural counseling are available (McGoldrick et al., 2005); however, there is little in the area of the counselor as the outsider, or existing as the one who is foreign-born within the dominant culture. Furthermore, research that does exist focuses on counselors who are immigrants to the United States, with little to show
what is actually taking place within the sessions in this pairing. Given the American counseling field’s goal of increased internationalization (Leong & Ponterotto, 2003; Marsella & Pedersen, 2004; Ng et al., 2012), examining where international work is already being done is critical to provide potential groundwork for internationalization efforts, particularly by the American counselor education field. This exploratory study looks at the experience of the American immigrant counselor and distinct dynamic of this client-counselor relationship with the goal of contributing this knowledge to the counselor education field. Given the limited nature of what is known about immigrant counselors generally, broad research aims were developed to answer the research question, “what is the experience of the American immigrant counselor?” More specifically, the researchers aimed to explore the counselor’s ability to come from a questioning nature, the experience of culture shock within sessions and being in the position of learner.

**Method**

**Design**

The concept of this qualitative study was generated from the first author’s own experience working as an American counselor in Ireland and was conducted within a critical realist framework. Critical realism posits that there is a knowable reality, but the way that reality is experienced is shaped by cultural and social understandings. As such, reality can only ever be partially accessed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The experiences described in the present study, rather than being a direct reflection of participants’ subjective realities, are therefore situated within a particular social and cultural context (Willig, 2013). This study was granted ethical approval by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee at the host University (application ref: 70,523) and was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (2014).

**Participants**

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling and located via their public LinkedIn profiles, as no database or registry of American counselors practicing abroad exists. Convenience sampling was used due to the small number of potential participants. Inclusion criteria included Americans who had graduated from a United States CACREP-accredited or equivalent masters-level graduate counseling program. Participants were not excluded if they did not hold state licensure but eligibility for state licensure was required. These criteria were intended to ensure participants had a similar education and training and would all be considered as counselors by United States standards. Participants who worked primarily with American expats rather than the local population were also excluded because their experience would not capture the experience of an immigrant counselor.
A LinkedIn member search was performed by cross-referencing profiles that had attended American universities that offer masters- or above level counseling programs with current locations of Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Ireland, and the United Arab Emirates. These countries were selected to identify potential participants who were conducting the majority of their sessions in English. As language and culture are so closely linked (Burck, 2004), American counselors who speak and work in a second language are likely to have a stronger cultural tie to their host country and may not adequately capture the experience of an American immigrant counselor. Fifty-five potential participants were identified and sent an e-mail containing the study information and a link to an eligibility questionnaire. Of the 12 potential participants who completed the questionnaire, seven participants met the criteria and were then sent a Participant Information Sheet. The number of participants was guided by the concept of information power rather than saturation, which posits that a less extensive sample is needed for qualitative studies with a highly specific study aim concerning experiences that have not been described before (Malterud et al., 2016). Participants had the opportunity to ask questions prior to consenting to taking part.

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with White North Americans (6 females, 1 male) working in counseling positions outside of the United States, ranging in age from 32–60. All participants had at least a master’s degree from an American university that would allow them to practice in a licensed counseling position at minimum in the United States. Participants were located in Australia, England, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The length of counseling experience in the host country varied widely among participants, ranging from less than one year to over 20. Participant practice settings included community settings (2), private practice (2), school (1), clinic (1), and university (1). Further demographic information is intentionally not provided due to the relatively small number of American counselors working internationally to prevent participant identification.

**Ensuring Rigor**

The first author is an American, living outside of the United States at the time of the study with international counseling experience. The second author is British and does not have international counseling experience. Participants were aware of the shared experience as a White North American immigrant counselor with the first author during their interviews. To uncover any preconceptions and biases held by the first author, bracketing involved a process of bracketing interviews (Tufford & Newman, 2012) with the second author, which acted as an interface between the researcher (first author) and the data. This process ensured that any biases and assumptions held by the first author, due to shared experience with the participants, were mitigated. The first author also kept a reflexive journal (Hunt, 2011) throughout the interview process to make note of reactions and feelings that came up when discussing a shared experience with the participants. These were discussed with the second author to help establish trustworthiness in the research process (Morrow, 2005).
Data Collection

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2016) and were video and audio recorded, with participants’ consent, and transcribed verbatim. An 11-item, semi-structured interview guide was developed which covered areas of culture shock, lack of shared cultural experience, differences in practice abroad and American identity abroad, to connect to the research aims. Interview items were developed based on experiences and challenges of immigrant counselors identified by Kissil et al. (2013). Interview questions reflected a critical realist framework by making use of “Why?” and “How?” style questions and framing questions within the reality of physically moving to a foreign country (Brönnimann, 2022). This allowed participants to situate their responses within real experiences (Brönnimann, 2022). Semi-structured interviews were used for their ability to allow participants to raise issues that developed naturally but still utilize a set of same interview questions for each participant (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 78). Interviews were approximately 45 min in length.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which allows flexibility for the data to be coded within a broad range of epistemological or theoretical perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using a critical realist framework, coding was bottom-up and data-driven, maintaining a focus on data reflecting participants’ reality, while also acknowledging the meaning given to those experiences as influenced by socially shared meanings. Thematic analysis is valuable when exploring different perspectives of participants, looking at parallels and contrasts in data, and generating unexpected understandings (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, thematic analysis was chosen because of its accessibility to early career researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006), thus was appropriate for the first author. The disadvantages afforded by the flexibility of thematic analysis, such as inconsistency and lacking coherence (Nowell et al., 2017), were mitigated by the later career research skills of the second author, experienced in using and teaching thematic analysis, having published previously using this method.

Transcripts were read several times to ensure familiarity with the data before complete coding of the data, at the semantic level, was undertaken (by first author) and assisted via the use of NVivo Pro software version 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd.). A proportion of the coding was independently checked (by the second author) against the transcripts. Both authors then discussed where codes grouped together to identify emergent themes and patterns of meaning across the entire data set to ensure rigor (Hunt, 2011). From these emergent themes, three main themes and eight sub-themes were determined.

Results

Three main themes were generated from the analysis; (1) “I don’t have that experience”: lack of cultural knowledge as counseling technique, (2) “Being American was definitely in the room”: the presence of American stereotypes / politics within
the counseling session, and (3) “The façade of regulation”: issues surrounding lack of counseling regulation and transfer of professional credentials. See Table 1 for themes and sub-themes. Pseudonyms were used throughout this section to protect participants’ anonymity.

“I don’t have that experience”

Participants highlighted how they must explain to clients not to assume they have had a culturally similar experience. This theme was divided into two sub-themes, using this lack of experience as a counseling technique and client as the teacher. One participant phrased this specifically as having, “more permission to ask questions”,

…I say, “Oh, I haven’t been here very long. What are you referring to?” Or “Oh my gosh, I’ve never heard that word. What does that mean?” (…) I can sort of use the accent and that I’m not from here as a reason to be curious…[Taylor].

Another counselor capitalizes on the “dumb American” trope,

…look, this may mean something to you but treat me like a dumb American, explain that to me […], where if they were to say something like, well, you know how devastating that could be. I was like, well, no, that might not be entirely my experience. [Adrian].

This counselor goes on to highlight the benefits of the ability to use American stereotypes to help the client examine themselves differently,

…I would use that, that being the idiotic American. Don’t assume that I know what you’re talking about and that would shift them down a gear and it would allow them to try to explain…[Adrian].

While not having the experience was used by participants as a counseling technique, it did not always seem to be an intentional action, as counselors also reported the client as the teacher. For example,

I think they sort of cut you a break a little bit, but I think people enjoy teaching. Especially if you’re in a client seat where you are holding less power in that relationship, (…) [Taylor].

This counselor touches on the shift in power for the American immigrant counselor. Clients are also teaching their counselors about all aspects of life, from day-to-day references to important cultural understandings. Despite English as a common language, one counselor explains,

[…] that was actually something I struggled with. People would use terms that I had no idea what they meant. They’d have to explain it. [Hunter].

Asking the client to explain taken for granted cultural understandings further shifts the power imbalance between counselor and client-teacher, allowing for a more equal and potentially more dynamic client-counselor relationship.
“Being American was definitely in the room”

The presence of American stereotypes within the counseling session were mentioned across participants and captured within three sub-themes; American stereotypes, politically charged experiences and “us” versus “them” (the host country). One counselor recounts,

When I first came here, it was, “all Americans see a therapist, all Americans have a shrink and that shit doesn’t work here” sort of idea, “People just got to get on with it, what would you Americans know?” [Adrian].

Further, the image of counseling is compared between their current location versus the United States,

…culturally here getting therapy is not the way I’ve seen it. It’s not portrayed in the same way as it is in America. So, there’s a lot of shame associated with it. [Alex].

This counselor highlights the presence of stigma surrounding counseling within the host country.

Beyond American stereotypes as they are applied to mental health, counselors also contend with American politics as “automatically introduced” into their sessions. One counselor notes the inclination to want to apologize for America,

I get asked about my views on Trump all the time. And one of the things is that there is a big divide between even here. A small, but vocal, majority love him. The vast majority are like, what the fuck are you Americans up to? And I almost feel like I can become an apologist for Americanisms… [Adrian].

This consistent presence has required some counselors to develop a method for dealing with American political questions,

…when they hear my accent, and they ask where I’m from and they will bring up sort of mass shootings and what it’s like and what was it like going to school and why don’t they pass legislation? And so, I’ve had to develop almost like a systematic way of talking about it. [Taylor].

This also appears in a more subtle way, another counselor describes their method,

…almost every single client wants to know what my opinion is on the political system. I just lie and tell them I’m not really political.” [Hunter].

American counselors encounter the stiff upper lip of ‘keep calm and carry on’ in several aspects of their experience. One counselor describes,

if someone is anxious, for example, or a student cries in front of one of my (UK) colleagues, they get very nervous about it; and feel that it’s an emergency in ways that are surprising to me. [Harper].

Another counselor describes how this ever-present reminder of the difference has changed their practice,
as a therapist I’m a bit different in that like if it’s appropriate I might self-disclose because I’ve experienced panic attacks, for example, whereas, and that kind of I think also gives them permission and then maybe thinking, "Oh, she’s probably saying that because she’s American". Because we don’t admit that kind of thing here. [Alex].

This counselor utilizes the cultural difference as a vehicle for self-disclosure and suggests that this impacts favorably on their practice. Another participant, who displayed an American flag in their office, also acknowledges a difference between the counseling “model” of the United States versus the host culture and intentionally chooses to self-disclose personal information, including an American background,

The [name of host culture] model is you do not self-disclose. You do not talk about yourself. Where in the American model we’re trying to normalize the experience for the client. We’re trying to humanize ourselves to the client. So, I do that. I have little bits of myself all around my office. [Francis].

“The façade of regulation”

Participants decried the lack of regulation and standardization of counseling in non-American cultures. One counselor explains,

…over here, it seems to be that as soon as you get the diploma, and it is nothing higher than a high school diploma to become a counselor here, you can work with whoever you want. That is really unethical. [Francis].

Another counselor describes the differences in training requirements between the United States and the host country,

You could do a weekend diploma course instead of a…and practice as a counselor and they do so much damage and it’s so sad. [Harper].

This highlights what they perceive as the potential danger to clients posed by counselors who may have completed only short courses in contrast to the master’s degree and subsequent supervision hours required in the United States to practice. This counselor describes their experience trying to work within the regulations that do exist,

So, it [the host country] has the façade, the veneer of regulation, but I had to report a supervisee and the [professional] association did nothing about it. It was blatantly horrible and gross negligence towards a client and because the client […] did not want to push forward with a complaint, the association did nothing about it. [Adrian].

In addition to the lack of international counseling regulation, counselors also report the difficulty having their, often higher, credentials being recognized in their new countries. One counselor states,

I’m stuck as a generally registered psychologist, even though I have a doctorate degree and master’s degree… [Rowan].
This same counselor also expressed their frustration at the supervision requirement of the host country,

“When I started five years ago, I was already registered from 20 years ago, but I had to go through two years of supervision”. [Rowan].

Similarly, another counselor states the lack of clarity with regards to counseling qualifications,

…there’s not this really clear, you need these degrees, you need this graduate degree, you need this much supervision and then you have to pass this exam. It’s really not uniform over here… [Taylor].

This counselor explains the perception of not holding a doctorate in the host culture,

I think they always felt like, “Oh, (colleague) is the person that I want to see because she has a doctorate,” not understanding that (colleague) was 15 years younger than I, and had significantly less training, also quite good, but there’s a significant difference in our experience. [Harper].

Counselors also explain that in many cases, the perception of American counseling education is held in higher esteem, even by local supervisors and clinicians. A counselor discusses their manager’s opinion,

The moment someone applies having the US training he’s [participant’s Manager] like, “Interview them, I don’t care what their experiences are, just interview them” because the training quality is so much better in the US. It’s properly regulated versus here. [Hunter].

This counselor relates how clients may also hold United States training in higher regard,

It’s interesting when it’s an [nationality removed] person who has no affiliation with US, when they say, ‘I saw your US training, so I just picked you’. [Hunter].

Discussion

The concept of the immigrant counselor not having the same experience as the client is consistent with the limited literature on immigrant counselors. Although the focus of Kissil et al.’s (2013) research was immigrant counselors to the United States, the findings remain consistent. While the participants initially refer to being an immigrant counselor as a difficulty, they then agree that immigrant counselor status can become an advantage for the counselor. Participants frequently highlighted the advantage of being an immigrant counselor in the present study, finding themselves able to fall back on their outsider status and ask the client “why?” in a more elementary sense, similar to Kissil et al. and’s (2013, p. 141) concept of “genuine curiosity”. Because Kissil et al.
attributed the initial difficulty of the position of the foreign counselor being perceived by an American client as less competent, it is possible this difficulty is not present in the opposite pairing, as American counselor training seems to be held in higher regard, even by clinical directors internationally.

The positioning of the client as teacher in counseling sessions was seen across the participants, with the American counselor positioned as outside the host culture impacting the power dynamic. Because there may be explanations required of the client, that may not be there with a client from the same culture, the client as teacher necessitates a more active participation in the therapeutic process from the client (Barreto, 2013). In addition, participants in the present study referred to things such as needing the client’s assistance with understanding certain words or cultural experiences. While Barreto’s research again addressed immigrant counselors to the United States, the client’s responsibility, “for preventing miscommunication and helping to bridge the cultural differences,” (2013, p. 353) still applies to the findings of the current study. Without the cultural knowledge, the immigrant counselor lacks preconceived ideas on how things ought to be, allowing them to better engage in the counseling relationship in a way where they are fully present and in acknowledgement of the client’s expertise on their own lives (Barreto, 2013).

The findings of the present study highlight the experience of being an American counselor in foreign settings, participant views reflecting cultural stereotypes regarding Americans and mental health. The common perception is of Americans as more open regarding mental health and conversely, citing shame, embarrassment, and self-esteem as the dominant attitudes of the host culture towards mental health or seeing a counselor. However, some evidence suggests this may be more than a stereotype. A recent study of high-income countries found that Americans were among the most likely to want to visit a professional for help with emotional distress, with the UK among the least likely (Tikkanen et al., 2020), lending some credence to immigrant counselors’ observations.

Beyond cultural stereotypes surrounding mental health, participants highlighted how American immigrant counselors contend with American political issues within sessions. This is consistent with documented stereotypes experienced abroad by Americans, with “Trump supporter” being one of the most dominant stereotypes only one year after his election (Goldstein, 2017). The American immigrant counselors within the present study, therefore, had developed a method for dealing with this in session, such as apologizing or distancing themselves from American politics.

Finally, across participants were themes of issues regarding professional identity and status. This was seen as culture shock due to the perceived lack of regulation in counseling outside the United States, becoming professionally established in a counseling role, and the foreign perception of their American titles. Lack of counseling license portability among states is already a known issue for American counselors, creating problems for clients, counselors, and the counseling profession (Bayne & Doyle, 2019). Participants frequently cited concerns in this area, with ethics of the lack of standardization in the United States even in question, where minimum requirements in every state far exceed anything required in any of the countries of the participants. While personal
and professional losses in terms of status and credentials can be experienced by immigrants in any field (Barreto, 2013), this should not be considered a case of American exceptionalism when counselor or similar mental health titles are looked down upon when their foreign counterparts are not educated and trained to a comparable level. While Kissil, et al. (2013) called for immigrant counselors to the United States to steer their way through a new professional setting while attempting to incorporate the previous professional culture into the current to provide a streamlined professional identity, incorporating previous professional culture may prove difficult when moving to a system that, by American counselor education standards, could be considered unethical.

Participants in the current study suggest that American counseling is more advanced than other countries. While the American dominance in psychology and counseling cannot be denied (see Thalmayer et al., 2020), neither can the lack of regulation in other countries, nor the lack of dialogue among regulatory boards in all countries in making a uniform attempt at recognizing credentials. However, we can recognize the standards of American counselor education but still call for increasing the cultural scope of counseling.

Further Research

Previous research and the current study establish the lack of shared cultural experiences as a technique in counseling sessions for immigrant counselors. However, no specific research focuses on the American counselor using this technique while capitalizing on the “dumb American” stereotype. Further research could focus on connecting these stereotypes to the counselor experience and how to better connect cross-culturally with the client as an American immigrant counselor. Capitalizing on the stereotypes of “loud” and “friendly” may be of therapeutic benefit to reach those in “stiff upper lip cultures.” By further exploring these techniques, counselor education programs may become more comfortable implementing more support for international counseling training experiences, a key objective in internationalizing counselor education (Fatemi et al., 2019; Leong & Ponterotto, 2003; Ng & Noonan, 2012).

Future research should also focus on best practices for American counselors abroad dealing with American specific issues, such as Trump and mass shootings. Though levels of perceived prejudice have been “significantly associated” with levels of clinical self-efficacy (Kissil et al., 2012, p. 216) for immigrants working as counselors in the United States, it is likely this could not be broadly applied to American immigrant counselors in other countries without further study. In short, much of the current literature about immigrant counselors simply does not apply to Americans counseling abroad because of American-specific stereotypes.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the experience of the first author as a White North American immigrant, American-educated counselor, as providing the
motivation for the study. Inductive thematic analysis was used for this reason, to let the participant’s experiences create the themes, however, the participants were still aware of the shared experience and identity as a White North American between themselves and the interviewer. The comradery of being an American abroad, with the added shared experience of the potentially isolating position of American counselor abroad, produced a dialogue that was specific to the first author having a shared experience and likely shaped both the data collected and how it was analyzed. The shared experience, while believed to have helped create rapport with the participants that could not have been gained otherwise due to the culturally sensitive nature of some of the topics discussed, some amount of subjectivity is still implicit in this type of qualitative research.

This study was limited to western, English-speaking countries. Despite difficulties with accents and regional dialect, counselors primarily spoke the same language as their host country. The findings of the study, and their implications, may have been different had counselors been working in a language other than their native English. Additionally, though race and ethnicity demographics for participants are not reported here to protect anonymity, all participants identified as White North Americans. Even though White North Americans may experience some degree of marginalization in some cultures due to perceptions of Americans and American politics, it is important to reiterate that American counselors of color could have vastly different experiences by holding multiple non-privileged identities (Ratts et al., 2016).

The findings reported here reflect the experience of a small group of American immigrant counselors working outside the United States, and therefore these implications are made with caution. Recruitment and interviews took place during April and May of 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is believed to have a significant effect on recruitment efforts.

**Conclusion**

Despite the emphasis placed upon multicultural competency in American counselor education, as far as the authors are aware, no research currently exists which explores the American immigrant counselor experience. Participants in the current study – counselors already applying cross-cultural practices with their clients, as the immigrant in the counseling session – are critically positioned to help guide best practices for multicultural competencies. To do this, counseling researchers and counselor educators must not only consult with those already living and practicing abroad, but also encourage future counselors to broaden their own cultural experiences by providing opportunities to incorporate working abroad into the American counselor education. Further research is suggested into the American immigrant counselor experience during the post-Trump era as it will help develop best practices for current and future American immigrant counselors.
Appendix

Table 1  Themes and sub-themes

| Themes                          | Sub-Themes                                    |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| “I don’t have that experience”  | As counseling technique                       |
|                                 | Client as teacher                             |
| “Being American was definitely in the room” | American stereotypes                       |
|                                 | Politically charged experiences in session   |
|                                 | Us versus them culture shock                  |
| “The façade of regulation”     | Damages from lack of regulation               |
|                                 | Perception of professional identity           |

Table 1

Declarations

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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