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**Cultural Competence in Social Work: A Conceptual Analysis****Dr. Dilrukshi Abeysinghe***Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.*

**Abstract:** Respect for cultural diversity is a fundamental value of the social work profession. The Professional Associations in social work charge social workers with the ethical responsibility to be culturally competent and set out the indicators to achieve the standards for cultural competence in social work practice. Researchers associate the major focus of social work literature in cultural diversity with ethnic minorities. This paper comprehensively addresses the concept of cultural competence, suggesting the importance of considering how differences between professional culture and lay culture are created within the same ethnic group. The main objective of this paper is to present a conceptual analysis of cultural competence and discusses how it informs the best standards for social work practice. The study is based on a semi-systematic review of the literature. Working systematically through

literature the researcher identified topics that are progressively integrated into key themes, the importance of which lies in their ability to address the objective of the study. The paper suggests that cultural competence should be defined by the capacity to apply models and practice methods in a more 'culturally appropriate manner' in the practice context. The paper further argues that cultural competency simply does not imply that all actions taken in social work practice should be in accordance with the cultural regularities of the service users that they serve, as it also informs social work professionals to look at culture through a critical approach, the problematic context in which culture must be negotiated.

**Key words:** Cross-Cultural Situations, Cultural Competence, Cultural Diversity, Social Work Practice, Social Work Standards

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Respect for cultural diversity is a fundamental value of the social work profession. The Professional Associations in social work charge social workers with the ethical responsibility to be culturally competent and set out the indicators to achieve the standards for cultural competence in social work practice. Cultural competence evolved throughout the last two decades, not only as an ethical standard but also as a concept, a set of principles, knowledge theory, and practice framework (Lum, 2011).

Although cultural competence is a widely used concept in social work, it is important to acknowledge that the term is not universally accepted. One of the main criticisms raised finds its basis in the term competence. It is impossible to achieve competence since culture is not static but, rather, continually evolving and changing (Fung et al., 2012; O'Donohue, 2005). Therefore, cultural competence is never fully achieved or completed, rather, it is a lifelong process for social workers who will always encounter diverse service users and settings in their practice.

### 1.2. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a semi-systematic review of the literature (Snyder, 2019). It was mainly focused on how cultural competence has been conceptualized differently and studied by researchers within the social work discipline. This provided an understanding of different interpretations of the concept and assesses whether the arguments for the interpretations made were realistic from a methodological standpoint. Working systematically through the literature the researcher identified topics that are progressively integrated into higher-order key themes, the importance of which lies in their ability to address the objective of the study (Ritchie et al., 2014).

#### **Culture and cultural diversity**

The word culture often refers to the integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes customs, beliefs, values, and languages held in common by a group of people, giving them a sense of belongingness and identity. The scholars (Baldwin et al. 2012) describe two interrelated aspects of human culture: material culture, which consists of physical objects of the culture, and non-material culture, in contrast, refers to several processes that a culture uses to shape its member's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. The most important of these are symbols, language, values, and norms. But what constitutes culture is unspecified. There is no consensus on the substance of culture. Baldwin et al. (2012) analysed different definitions of culture through interdisciplinary review and showed that the concept has wide use across academic disciplines with different meanings.

Researchers associate the major focus of social work literature in cultural diversity with race and ethnicity (Laird, 2008; Pinderhughes, 1989) because an ethnic group receives classification as a broader group in opposition to others based on their perceptions of cultural differentiation. The culture comprises a set of beliefs and practices, some of which become important to signifying membership of a particular ethnic group. Some scholars (O'Donohue, 2005; Rothman, 2008; Sue et al., 2016) commented on the use of the term cultural diversity, mainly focusing on race and ethnicity, with minimal attention paid to other culturally diverse groups. They emphasize the importance of going beyond ethnicity to understand the multiple identities of people who see themselves in

dimensions beyond race and ethnicity. It could be any group of people that have a shared sub-culture and tradition.

The Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in the Social Work Practice developed by the National Association of Social Workers (Murray, 2020) reflect the growth in the understanding of cultural diversity being inclusive beyond race and ethnicity, which is inclusive of, but not limited to, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and religious identity or spirituality. Many societies reflect a broadening and rich cultural diversity context. This context is evident in the changing ethnic and racial demographics, as well as the sociocultural experiences of people of different genders, social classes, religious and spiritual beliefs, sexual orientations, ages, and physical and mental abilities (Sue et al., 2016). According to the National Association of Social Workers (Murray, 2020), culture includes, but is not limited to, history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions of client groups served within the different cultures related to race and ethnicity, immigration, and refugee status, tribal status, religion and spirituality, sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression, social class, age, national origin, and physical or mental ability. The term culture includes ways in which people, with disabilities or people from various religious backgrounds, or people who are gay, lesbian, or transgender, experience the world around them.

It is widely believed that the cultural dimensions of human experiences are vitally important, but they have very different ideas about the meanings of these cultural categorizations and how they should be thought about in practice (Laird, 1998). Some research evidence (O'Donohue, 2005) show that the cultural group categorization made by the practitioners may differ from the service user's perceived group membership.

In relation to family therapy, some authors believe that if one is simply a good listener and able to gain a superficial understanding of the family structure, rules, and other patterns, then what is important about culture will emerge without having special knowledge of a service user's culture (Laird, 1998). Some scholars (Laird, 1998; Saleebey, 1994) suggest a narrative approach to analysing the meanings of culture that are important in practice. The narrative approach scrutinizes cultural identity and its meanings, focusing on the lives of individuals as told through their own stories. Rothman (2008) suggests cultural immersion into the selected population to gain insight and acquire cultural awareness. The immersion activities include: reading an autobiography, biography, or story based on true experiences; watching a film; attending cultural events; interviewing member(s) from the target culture; listening to music, and exploring the history of the selected group using a variety of information sources. Lum (2011) proposes a participatory approach by placing the worker and service user in an egalitarian relationship. It involves participation, wherein both the worker and the service user together explore and learn cultural and ethnic history, as well as values and behavioural issues which are relevant to understanding a particular problem in the helping relationship.

### **Cultural competence**

Cultural competence emerged as a practice concept for addressing the needs of individuals and groups from non-white racial and ethnic backgrounds. Barbara Solomon's (1976) *Black Empowerment* is a landmark book in social work literature, in terms of enhancing the capabilities of professionals for more responsive problem-solving efforts in ethnic minority communities. The concept of cultural competence appeared first in social work and counselling psychology literature. Green (1982) and

Pinderhughes (1989) introduced the concept of cultural competence to social work. Since its introduction, scholars continue to define it from different stances.

The concepts 'cultural awareness', 'cultural sensitivity,' and 'cultural competence' have wide usage in social work literature. According to Gallegos et al. (2008), concepts such as ethnic competence and cultural awareness are iterations of cultural competence. Some scholars (Cross et al., 1989; Rothman, 2008) view cultural competence as a process which includes acquiring knowledge about a service user's culture (cultural awareness), sensitivity to a service user's culture (cultural sensitivity), and application of this knowledge and skills in social work practice (cultural competence) (Rothman, 2008). Accordingly, cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity are different stages of the process of achieving cultural competency. For the development of cultural competence in practice or having the capacity to function effectively in cross-cultural situations, the worker should have a knowledge base of their service user's culture and seek to be sensitive. Cross et al. (1989) view the process of achieving cultural competency as occurring along a continuum of six different stages, which include cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural pre-competence, cultural competence, and cultural proficiency. Scholars (Cross et al. 1989) characterise cultural destructiveness by attitudes, policies, structures, and practices within a system or organization that are destructive to a cultural group. Cultural incapacity is the lack of capacity systems and organizations have to respond effectively to the needs, interests, and preferences of culturally diverse groups. Cultural blindness is an expressed philosophy of viewing and treating all people as the same and disregarding cultural diversity. Cultural pre-competence shows a work in progress toward the positive end of the continuum by recognizing cultural differences and making efforts to improve.

Culturally competent social work practice refers to all levels of practice – micro, mezzo, and macro (Lum, 2011; Murray, 2020). Microcultural competence involves direct interaction with individuals, families, and small groups that help solve the problems faced by them. Mezzo cultural competence addresses the organizational dimension which determines whether an institution has a culturally competent system of care. The macro level involves intervening on a large scale to bring about improvement and change in the general society. These three levels dynamically interact with one another.

The seminal work of Cross et al. (1989) offered a definition of cultural competence that established a solid foundation for the field of social work. According to Cross et al. (1989: 13), cultural competence refers to,

[A] set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system or agency or amongst professionals and enable the system, agency, or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. The word 'culture' is used because it implies the integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. The word competence is used because it implies having the capacity to function effectively.

Lum (2011) suggests the following working definition of cultural competence.

[T]he mutual consent of the worker and the client to become culturally proficient by participating together in the exploration and learning of cultural and ethnic history, values,

and behavioural issues which are relevant to understanding particular problems in the helping relationship as part of the micro practice process and to work toward the development of meso and macro policies and programs which benefit clients who are culturally and ethnically diverse (Lum 2011: 20).

Lum's definition endorses a mutual and joint relationship of consent, respect, and participation, wherein both the worker and the service user are helping themselves and each other as they strive toward cultural proficiency through the study of cultural elements that impact the problem or situation. Williams (2006) explores the epistemological landscape of cultural competence and demonstrates the utility of the theoretical foundation for multicultural social work practice. She suggests that cultural competence should be defined by the capacity to work across multiple paradigms in order to find ways to engage with service users.

The National Association of Social Workers (Murray, 2020) introduced the concept of cultural humility and intersectionality, which are important to culturally competent social work practice. Cultural humility refers to,

[T]he attitude and practice of working with clients at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels with a presence of humility while learning, communicating, offering help, and making decisions in professional practice and settings (Murray, 2020: 16).

This perspective has the benefit of placing the worker in a learning mode as opposed to maintaining power, control, and authority in the working relationship and empowering service users as experts in their own lives (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Murray, 2020). Intersectionality is a way of understanding the complexity of the experiences of those at the margins of society. It examines forms of oppression, discrimination, and domination as they manifest themselves through diversity, including multiple identities such as race and ethnicity, immigration, refugee and tribal status, religion and spirituality, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, social class, and mental or physical disabilities (Murray, 2020). An intersectionality approach integrates the various diversity components and identities to approach practice from a holistic point of view.

### **Standards for cultural competence**

The regulatory bodies and the professional associations for social work developed standards for cultural competence, which guide social workers in all aspects of social work practice. The National Association of Social Workers (Murray, 2020), which is the professional body for social workers in the United States, developed the following ten standards that are widely used by other countries around the world.

- Ethics and Values – the social workers shall function by the values, ethics, and standards of the profession, recognizing how personal and professional values may conflict with or accommodate the needs of service users in diverse cultures.
- Self-awareness – the social workers shall commit to gaining insight into their own culture, values, and beliefs. Self-awareness helps social workers to ascertain the potential effects that their own heritage, values, and beliefs can have on their practice and on clients whose backgrounds and values may be different from their own.

- Cross-cultural knowledge – the social workers shall acquire knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions of service users that they serve.
- Cross-cultural skills – social workers shall use appropriate skills and techniques that reflect the workers’ understanding of the role of culture in practice, policy, and research.
- Service delivery – social workers shall be knowledgeable of and skilful in the use of services, resources, and institutions available in the community and broad society to provide assistance to service users and service user groups from diverse cultural backgrounds. They shall be able to make culturally appropriate referrals when service gaps arise that affect specific cultural groups.
- Empowerment and advocacy – social workers shall be aware of the impact of social systems, policies, practices, and programs on diverse cultural service user groups, as well as advocate for and with service users from diverse cultures whenever appropriate. They are obligated to participate in the development and implementation of policies and practices that empower and advocate for marginalized and oppressed individuals from diverse cultures.
- Diverse workforce – social workers shall support and advocate for recruitment, admissions and hiring, and retention efforts in social work programs and organizations that ensure cultural diversity within the profession.
- Professional education – social workers shall advocate for and participate in professional education and training programs that develop academic and professional expertise and skills in working with culturally diverse service users.
- Language and communication – social workers shall seek to provide and advocate for effective communication with service users from diverse cultural groups, including people of limited language proficiency, low literacy skills, and vision and hearing difficulties.
- Cross-cultural leadership – social workers shall be able to demonstrate the leadership skills to work effectively with diverse cultural groups in agencies, organizational settings, and communities, as well as demonstrate responsibility for advancing cultural competence within and beyond their organizations by helping to challenge structural and institutional oppression and to build and sustain diverse and inclusive institutions and communities.

### **Implications for culturally competent social work practice**

The interest in cultural competence in social work grew against the backdrop of large-scale migration through an increasingly global economy and refugee movements mainly in the United States, United Kingdom, and other European countries. Immigrants faced many challenges and problems in their adaptation, integration, and assimilation into the culture of the host country, which is different from their own. These problems and challenges of cultural shock have influential effects in terms of their social and mental wellbeing, and they sometimes create social tensions in the areas where immigrants concentrate (Laird, 2008; Winkelman, 1994).

The social work agencies faced pressures related to the consequences of the ethnic minority migrants, which have different national or cultural traditions from the main population. The culture of the practitioner reflects in the jargon they use, in their mindset, and worldviews, which may be very different from the culture of their service users (Laird, 2008; Pinderhughes, 1989). Social service agencies failed to translate information into minority community languages. The dominant culture of

the host country expressed through social institutions, regulated the types of problems that received recognition and which social or cultural differences were worthy of attention. Migrants, with non-dominant ethnic and cultural backgrounds, experienced difficulties in accessing social services and in obtaining appropriate services. Ethnic and cultural issues were not fully addressed in social work assessments, nor were their needs properly identified. The barriers they faced in using services often related to culture. The social work agencies received criticism for discrimination against ethnic minorities due to their failure to provide appropriate and professional service, ignorance of their cultures, inequitable treatment, and the failure to take into consideration their cultural backgrounds.

Researchers identified (Laird, 2008; Sue et al., 2016) cultural incompetence as a major contributory factor in discrimination. Without cultural self-awareness, complemented by a knowledge of the cultural influences on the lives of other people, social workers will invariably impose their own cultural worldviews on their service users. The ability of a system, agency, or professional to become culturally competent intensified in relation to civil rights (Lum, 2011). The civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and European countries greatly influenced the growing emphasis on cultural competence in social work. Endeavouring toward cultural competence is crucial to achieving social justice, a goal which all social workers strive toward (Lum, 2011; Sue et al., 2016). It ensures access to needed information, services, resources, equality of opportunity, and meaningful participation in decision making for people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Cultural competence includes action to challenge institutional and structural oppression (Laird, 2008; Murray, 2020).

According to Lum (2011), cultural competence movements grew in two related directions. First, on the clinical level, it provided the helping professions with a culturally focused theme. Second, cultural competence provided an educational and training perspective by which to develop academic and professional expertise and skills in working with culturally diverse service users. The emphasis on promoting culturally competent practice inspired steps to ensure cultural competence as an integral part of professional education in social work. Developing certain knowledge and skills are prerequisite for cultural competency (Jani et al., 2016; Murray, 2020).

Cultural competence challenges the universal models of helping. To be culturally competent, social workers must be able to free themselves from the cultural conditioning of their personal and professional training, understand and accept the legitimacy of alternative world views, and begin the process of developing culturally appropriate intervention strategies in working with diverse service users (Sue et al., 2016).

Many theories, concepts, and practices that inform social work interventions derive from within and reflect the dominant values of the Euro-American context (Payne, 2016; Sue et al., 2016). Certain interventions may represent cultural oppression and may reflect a Euro-American-centric worldview that may do great harm to culturally diverse service users and their communities (Payne, 2016; Sue et al., 2016).

Social workers should consider their use of theory and intervention models for ensuring cultural sensitivity and relevance to the service users receiving services. The strength perspective (Saleebey, 2013), for instance, provides a helpful framework for working within multicultural communities. It informs social workers on how to use the resources, assets, wisdom, and knowledge possessed by



the individual, family, and community around them, how to be respectful of them, and the potential they have in the helping process, which is a standard for culturally competent practice.

Cultural competency allows a social worker to self-critique and recognize how personal and professional values may conflict with or accommodate the needs of service users in multicultural settings (Murray, 2020). Cultural competency also permits a look at culture through a critical approach. The critical approach to cultural competence shifts the focus from the cultural creations of individuals and groups to the problematic context in which culture must be negotiated (Williams, 2006). Cultural competence requires social workers to recognize the strengths that exist in all cultures while renouncing cultural practices that violate human rights and dignity.

## **Discussion**

In the Euro-American context, the interest in cultural competence in social work grew against the backdrop of large-scale migration through an increasingly global economy and refugee movements. The social work agencies faced pressures related to the consequences of the ethnic minority migrants, which have different national or cultural traditions from the main population. Cultural competence emerged as a practice concept in addressing the needs of individuals and groups from ethnic minorities. Over the past few years, the standards and indicators for cultural competence in the social work practice developed (Murray, 2020) reflect the growth in the understanding of cultural diversity being inclusive beyond race and ethnicity, which is inclusive of, but not limited to, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and religious identity or spirituality.

Definitions and approaches to cultural competency vary widely depending on worldview, discipline, and practice context (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). The culturally competent practice in the non-Euro-American context requires a broader approach to meet the standards for cultural competence. There is controversy about whether social work theories are global or restricted in their use. Many theories, concepts, and practices that inform social work interventions derive from within and reflect the dominant values of the Euro-American context (Payne, 2016; Sue et al., 2016). Radical and feminist casework, for instance, places a high value on individualism and independence, such as those embodied in the ethics of self-determination and the goal of personal autonomy and liberation (Fook, 1993). The cultures, which place higher importance on community responsibility and inter-dependence, may not share these sorts of assumptions. As a result, certain interventions may represent cultural oppression and may reflect a Euro-American-centric worldview that may do great harm to culturally diverse service users and their communities (Payne, 2016; Sue et al., 2016). By ignoring cultural diversity, powerful cultures could dominate the less potent through social work practices. Askeland and Payne (2006) show how forces of globalization may allow powerful cultures to dominate the less potent through social work education and diverse local cultures and languages, which may be lost in internationalized social work education. Through internationalized social work education, social work professionals may distance themselves from their own local cultures unless the social work education and training are appropriate to the local cultural situations. Therefore, cultural competence should be defined by the capacity to apply models and practice methods in a more 'culturally appropriate manner' in the practice context.

In sum, cultural competency encourages human service systems, agencies, and professionals to function effectively in a more 'culturally appropriate manner' in practice. Yet, cultural competency



simply does not imply that all actions taken in social work practice should be in accordance with the cultural regularities of the service users that they serve, as it also informs social work professionals to look at culture through a critical approach, the problematic context in which culture must be negotiated. Cultural competence requires social workers to recognize the strengths that exist in all cultures while renouncing cultural practices that violate human rights and dignity. Cultural competence in social work practice must be informed by and applied within the context of the values, ethics, and standards of the Code of Ethics in Social Work and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Murray, 2020: 21).

## **Conclusion**

The culturally competent practice in the non-Euro-American context requires a broader approach to meet the standards for cultural competence. Many theories, concepts, and practices that inform social work interventions derive from within and reflect the dominant values of the Euro-American context. As a result, certain social work interventions may represent cultural oppression and may reflect a Euro-American-centric worldview that may do great harm to culturally diverse service users and their communities. This concern highlights the importance of having a better understanding of how differences between professional culture and lay culture are created within the same ethnic group. Therefore, cultural competence should be defined by the capacity to apply models and practice methods in a more 'culturally appropriate manner' in the practice context. Cultural competency simply does not imply that all actions taken in social work practice should be in accordance with the cultural regularities of the service users that they serve, as it also informs social work professionals to look at culture through a critical approach, the problematic context in which culture must be negotiated. Further, looking at culture through a critical approach provides a way to understand the models and practice methods and their relevance to diverse cultural situations.

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