

# Effective Strategies for Teaching Cultural Competency to MSW Students in a Global Society

W. Jay Gabbard, Saundra H. Starks, Jeremiah Jagggers, Amy C. Cappiccie

**Abstract**—An ethical mandate of the social work profession in the United States is that BSW and MSW graduates are sufficiently prepared to both understand diverse cultural values and beliefs and offer services that are culturally sensitive and relevant to clients. This skill set is particularly important for social workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, given the increasing globalization of the U.S. and world. The purpose of this paper is to outline a pedagogical model for teaching cultural competency that resulted in a significant increase in cultural competency for MSW graduates at Western Kentucky University (WKU). More specifically, this model is predicated on five specific culturally sensitive principles and activities that were found to be highly effective in conveying culturally relevant knowledge and skills to MSW students at WKU. Future studies can assess the effectiveness of these principles in other MSW programs across the U.S. and abroad.

**Keywords**—Cultural Competence, Social Work, Teaching

## I. INTRODUCTION

PROMINENT cultural scholar Bell Hooks once observed, “If we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom” [1]. Despite this apparent trend in the academy, social work education in the United States has maintained a long tradition of confronting “ism’s,” questioning the dominant paradigm in society, exploring alternative ways of knowing, and championing social justice issues for oppressed client populations. It is true that “a commitment to cultural/ethnic/diversity competence is an essential component of a social worker’s commitment to the values and standards of our profession and to social justice” [2]. Cultural competency and social work values are thus inextricably linked, and the mastery of critical skills with diverse cultural groups required for those who would legally call themselves social workers in the United States.

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The cultural empowerment of oppressed client groups is an essential and guiding principal of social work practice [3]. Social work is one of comparatively few professions mandating, in its Code of Ethics, that its practitioners demonstrate an advanced understanding of cultural differences, manifest competence in providing culturally sensitive interventions, and actively challenge forces that work to subvert the interests of vulnerable client populations [4]. This is achieved through stand alone courses on cultural diversity/competency and by infusing this content throughout both BSW and MSW coursework. If programs are teaching what they are supposed to (and this is monitored by the Council on Social Work Education), then it is virtually impossible for graduates of accredited programs not to have encountered the values, beliefs, struggles, history, and unique considerations of various diverse cultural groups. With the increasing globalization of the world economy and social order, it is perhaps now more important than ever that social workers are proficient in both knowledge of and skills in working with diverse client groups. The United States is constantly undergoing major demographic changes. The recent emergence of Latinos as the predominant ethnic group (in numbers) in the U.S. is just one of these shifting demographics. These changes alter and increase the diversity confronting social workers daily in their agencies and require them to strive to deliver culturally competent services. Despite the continual presence of a dominant Eurocentric paradigm in the U.S., significant strides have been made in confronting racism, homophobia, gender bias, and other “ism’s.” The election of President Barack Obama, increased civil liberties for gays and lesbian individuals in some states, and the increasing entry of women into more (but not all) traditionally “male” professions are progressive steps in the right direction. However, for a number of oppressed cultural groups, the struggle is far from over. As one prominent cultural scholar noted, “white America has been historically weak-willed in ensuring racial justice and has continued to resist fully accepting the humanity of blacks” [5]. These xenophobic tendencies extend to other cultural groups, including immigrants (both legal and illegal), Muslims, gays and lesbians, and others viewed on the fringe of proverbial “mainstream” U.S. society. On the other hand, now that diversity and cultural awareness are more openly discussed and debated in U.S. society than perhaps some other periods in history, there is a window of opportunity for social workers to help plant seeds of tolerance that could potentially benefit their diverse clients and society in the future. This possibility is perhaps even more

important given the fact that “The U.S. has experienced increasing interest in cultural pluralism in recent years, a diversity of cultures that makes personal, social, and institutional relations more complex and challenging” [6]. As well, it is true that “U.S. society is constantly undergoing major demographic changes that heighten the diversity confronting social workers” [7]. It is absolutely critical that, given these rapidly changing demographic and social trends, that social workers are actively involved in the process of fostering culturally competent attitudes and practices in U.S. society. At Western Kentucky University (WKU), the MSW program is committed to fostering an awareness of diverse cultures and educating graduates who are highly skilled in implementing culturally sensitive interventions. Toward this end, in the five years of the program’s existence, it has developed an effective pedagogical strategy for cultural competency education. This has resulted in a statistically significant increase (measured by dependent t-tests) in students’ self-reported cultural awareness each year from 2004-2009. Over a 5 year period, there was a significant increase in self-reported cultural competence by students in the MSW program at WKU. Scores were paired from the original administration of the instrument (via code numbers) in order to facilitate a pre/post comparison. The data indicated a positive trend in terms of overall average cultural competency scores from the beginning to the end of the MSW curriculum. More importantly, the positive changes were significant at the .01 level, indicating a low probability that sampling error produced the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. For this reason, it is likely the pedagogical model employed had a positive effect on increasing cultural competency for MSW graduates during this time frame. This model itself is predicated on five culturally sensitive principals and activities that were found to be highly effective in conveying culturally relevant knowledge and skills to MSW students. They were:

- 1) A “Broader” Definition of Culture
- 2) A Focus on Both Knowledge and Skills Essential for Culturally Competent Practice
- 3) An Understanding of Cultural Relativism
- 4) A Required Culturally Diverse Experience
- 5) A Personal “Ism’s” Journal Assignment

The purpose of this paper is to concisely review these five components of this pedagogical model of teaching cultural competency in the MSW program at WKU. While this is by no means a “perfect” model of conveying this content, the program evaluation data yields definitively positive trends evidencing the program’s graduates emerging more culturally competent than when they entered the program. For this reason, the information contained in this paper might be valuable to other programs (within the U.S. or internationally) pursuing the same goal of increased cultural competence.

## II. AN EFFECTIVE MODEL OF TEACHING CULTURAL COMPETENCY: A “BROADER” DEFINITION OF CULTURE

In the social science literature, there are numerous definitions of culture and what it means to be culturally

competent. The definition often employed by social workers in the United States describes culture as “The customs, habits, skills, technology, values, ideology, science, and religious and political behavior of a group of people in a specific time period” [8]. There is also often a distinction made between man-made or material culture and non-material culture, such as language, values, beliefs, and social mores. Cultural competency refers to the “process by which social workers provide services that respond respectfully and effectively to all people in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families and communities while protecting and preserving the dignity of each” [9]. Cultural competence also refers to an outcome that is inclusive and promotes equality and social justice for all individuals while it recognizes the system of privilege afforded to the majority culture in this country. It is not uncommon for social work courses and texts (and the larger U.S. society) to emphasize ethnic diversity [10]-[12], [6], while paying less attention to the values and beliefs of less “traditional” cultural groups like the homeless, the military, and those living in distinct geographic locales (e.g. ruralities). At WKU, while the importance of ethnic/racial cultural sensitivity is emphasized, a more comprehensive, holistic definition of culture is employed, in order to better encapsulate the total cultural beliefs and values that MSW graduates are likely to encounter in advanced social work practice. Diversity in the program thus assumes a broader meaning than race and ethnicity, as it expands to cover the socio-cultural experiences of people of different ages, genders, social classes, religious and spiritual beliefs, sexual orientations, physical and mental abilities. Rurality is also conceptualized as an aspect of diversity and is developed throughout the course of study. This is important, as “Cross cultural skills and culturally sensitive methodologies are essential for social work in diverse rural communities” [13] page 349. Spirituality is acknowledged as an important aspect of the knowledge base required to practice social work in rural (and other) areas. As such, the program presents material on various practices of spirituality and religion while encouraging students to have an active participatory role in understanding the impact for client services. Rural churches and other types of religious institutions are often the primary informal helping system in the community, so they are explored as potential sources of social support. Students also learn different aspects of spiritual and religious assessment, with an emphasis on examining these areas from a broad, holistic (vs. a narrow minded, legalistic) perspective.

## III. A FOCUS ON BOTH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ESSENTIAL FOR CULTURALLY COMPETENT PRACTICE

The pedagogical model of cultural competency at WKU is strongly based on a mastery of both book knowledge of various cultural group’s histories, values, and beliefs, coupled with actual opportunities to apply culturally relevant skills both in class and in field placements. For example, in the flagship diversity course required of all MSW students, SWRK 501, students study the historical oppression of Native Americans in the United States but also practice interviewing techniques that

are culturally germane to this group (e.g. non-linear communication styles, the importance of narrative in therapy, building rapport before attempting to solicit sensitive information). Once these skills are honed in class, students have the opportunity to further develop their mastery of them with diverse clients in their respective field placements. In terms of the knowledge part of this equation, an emphasis is placed on historical accounts of important social problems written by members of non-majority groups. Students are taught that, as most history texts (at both the secondary and post-secondary level) are written by heterosexual, white, males, there is doubt as to whether the experiences of those oppressed by these groups can be objectively represented by their accounts. Professors assign some readings that flow against this traditional dominant paradigm and call into question the merits of white imperialism, gender inequities, and class discrimination. Even though this may make some students feel temporarily uneasy, hopefully they eventually understand that the privileged viewpoint represented in many "mainstream" texts is not always the reality of the clients they will be working with as MSW's.

#### IV. AN UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

A key concept taught to graduate students in SWRK 501 at WKU is cultural relativism. This idea, borrowed from the discipline of cultural anthropology, is "The view that specific norms and rituals can be understood accurately only in the context of a culture's goals, social history, and environmental demands" [8] page 114. The key principal here is that, in order for a student to truly understand where a client from a diverse culture is coming from, they have to be willing to step outside their somewhat limited, narrow frame of reference, and accept that there are multiple, alternate ways of knowing and living successfully. This realization is not always easy at first, particularly when a student has grown up in an area where one particular brand of culture has been emphasized and venerated as superior. However, once a student takes a chance and is willing to consider (even if they don't accept) an alternate viewpoint, the student develops an invaluable skill in working with clients who are different than themselves. They can appreciate diverse vantage points different from their own, and this is a critical aspect of a graduate education that teaches them to think more abstractly and less concretely. One of the fastest and most important ways to grasp this concept is through travel, and this is emphasized in the student's professional and personal development. At WKU, students are encouraged to travel to regional, national, and international conferences, in order to come into direct (e.g. without a filter) contact with other cultures. In recent years, MSW students have travelled to other countries such as England, China, and Mexico, and other diverse geographical areas of the United States. It is only by directly experiencing other diverse cultural groups *in their environmental context* that stereotypes can be confronted, relational walls broken down, and alliances forged with other individuals and groups. They can then form impressions of cultural groups from firsthand observations, rather than being privy to the biased interpretations of second-hand parties. It also exposes students to the perceived

arrogance some other cultures have of Western and European culture, where this way of life isn't perceived as the only "proverbial show in town." It is only by recognizing the validity of some of these "outside" perspectives that a dialogue on differences can be undertaken.

#### V. A REQUIRED CULTURALLY DIVERSE EXPERIENCE

All students in the MSW program are required to complete a Cultural Sensitivity Project, in which they are required to actively participate in at least one meeting, event, or interaction with a culturally diverse group or individual they would not typically encounter in their daily lives. The purpose here is to "peel back the outer layer" of a group they do not completely understand and obtain first-hand experience with and knowledge of them. However, students do not merely attend and describe the event, they also critically evaluate key aspects of the experience, including:

How was this experience different for you?

What did you learn that you did not know about the cultural group you investigated?

What stereotypes about the group were confirmed or rejected by your experience?

As a result of your attending the event or function, how will you relate to this cultural group differently in the future, both in your personal life and in social work practice?

Another key aspect of this exercise is to force students out of their "comfort zones" and into unfamiliar territory. This experience better prepares them for advanced social work practice, where practitioners often cannot anticipate exactly which diverse cultural group will be coming through the door for services. It also builds empathy with oppressed clients, who are continually placed in situations where their culture is not the dominant one. Students literally get to (in a limited way) "walk a mile in client's shoes."

The best projects are often those where the student directly encounters those who they are most prejudiced against or fearful of (e.g. a self-described homophobic student attending a gay and lesbian advocacy meeting or a student afraid of working with the elderly who spends a day at a nursing home). Of course, safety is taken into consideration when project ideas are approved. However, the experiences that make students feel the least comfortable are often the ones they grow the most from, in the program's experience.

After attending the experience, in addition to many stereotypes and myths being debunked (and perhaps some confirmed), students often report it is much harder to hate and stereotype a group when they have established a personal connection with them. Forging personal relationships often breaks down the walls of intolerance, misinformation, and bigotry for these MSW students. A number of alumni of the program have indicated that because of this fact, the Culturally Diverse Experience was one of the most significant aspects of their MSW education, with perhaps even more sustained impact than book knowledge they obtained and formal lectures.

#### VI.A PERSONAL "ISM'S" JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT

A key aspect of becoming a culturally competent and sensitive practitioner is coming to grips with one's own "ism's" and personal baggage that may influence (even subconsciously) how clients from a particular cultural background are treated [7]. Social workers are certainly not immune from bigotry, judgmental behavior, and intolerance and sometimes, the clients suffer as a result. As one scholar noted, "There is an additional reason why social workers should give careful attention to the quality of their cross-cultural work-their own unfortunate history of insensitivity to ethnic and minority groups" [12] page 6. In this same vein, a key principal emphasized in the MSW program at WKU is that one is a social worker 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. If there is a disjoint between one's personal and professional conduct with regards to cultural sensitivity, then there is a potential compromise of effectiveness and harm to clients. Students are encouraged to practice cultural competency in all areas of their lives, including challenging inappropriate remarks by clients, colleagues, and even relatives. Intolerance and bigotry can even be present in social work academia, as one scholar observes, where "All of a sudden, professors who had taken issues of multiculturalism and cultural diversity seriously were backtracking, expressing doubts, casting votes in directions that would restore biased traditions or prohibit changes in faculty and curricula that were to bring diversity of representation and perspective [1] page 31. Professors who are not willing to actively take stands and confront ism's may be then, guilty of collusion and maintaining a status quo that is oppressive to culturally diverse clients. This same trend can also be found in educational and work environments where social work values are not predominant and less culturally-sensitive models are emphasized. As one scholar observed, "Although there is much an individual social worker can do to provide more culturally sensitive practice, individual efforts will not go far unless the vision of cultural sensitivity is encoded into the fabric of social service organizations [14] page 436. Given these realities, the importance of connecting with one's own ism's becomes even more critical. Change at the macro level cannot occur until those at the micro level are aware of potential biases and personal baggage that may compromise interventions with oppressed clients. Towards the end of greater self-awareness of potential ism's, all MSW students at WKU spend time observing, listening to, and recording as many incidents of oppressive language, gestures, or behaviors they encounter referring to different individuals' or groups' age, ethnicity, class, color, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Examples would be if they overhear a racial slur, encounter someone making fun of the elderly, or overhear sexually inappropriate remarks made to a woman. As they experience these ism's such as racism, sexism, and ageism, they record them daily in a journal. These incidents can be observed in their daily routines, on television, in movies, in advertising, at church, or at school. In addition to describing these oppressive incidents, they also consider how they thought and/or felt about what they saw or heard, including:

Were you personally affected by the incident? If so, in what way?

Were any false stereotypes about certain cultural groups promoted by the incident?

If other people witnessed the incident, what were their reactions?

Did you do anything to confront the oppressive situation? If so, how did they react to you?

What did the person or group making the offensive remark or gesture seem to hope to gain from being racist or sexist?

How does the incident you observed relate to prior incidents you have witnessed concerning this particular cultural group?

Being cognizant of and sensitive to the invariable ism's held by practitioners and experienced by clients on a regular basis is essential to a holistic understanding of their situation. It is also often these ism's that become a target of social work intervention (at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels), and this profession is well-equipped to facilitate this. The mandate to confront these "ism's" is also clearly manifest in the NASW Code of Ethics [4] and the NASW Standards for Cultural Competency [9].

#### VII. CONCLUSION

Cultural competency and an appreciation for the diverse values and beliefs of diverse client groups is something that cannot merely be taught out of a book-it must be experienced directly. Social work educators owe it to their students not only to teach them the pertinent history, values, and customs of oppressed and marginalized groups; they also need to put them into situations where they are forced to directly encounter and empathize with the negative forces of racism, bigotry, homophobia, ethnocentrism, and gender bias which plague their clients every day. This is what eventually enables the social worker to "affirm the legitimacy of the client's struggle, embrace unconventional client strengths, and seek to empower the client to function healthily in a life context" [3]. Hopefully the pedagogical model of teaching cultural competency presented in this paper can be useful to other social work programs in the U.S. (and abroad) that are also striving to produce graduates with a good balance of culturally competent knowledge and skills. In the end, the groups that stand to gain the most from culturally competent social work education are the clients, and it is ultimately the responsibility of social work educators to make sure that their curriculum produces significant gains in this area, for their ultimate benefit.

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