

In Pursuit of Cultural Competency in Social Work Practice

By

Nur Hilyah Bte Saparin

Abstract

This paper discusses cultural competency in social work practice, and emphasizes its importance within Singapore's multicultural framework. Using Fay's (1990) ideas of understanding the experiences of others, the author argues for the need to move beyond traditional cultural competency training, which focuses on recognizing group traits and similarities, towards cultural competency involving awareness that cross-cultural perceptions and experiences may be socially constructed, and may have differences even within cultural groups. Social workers hence need to be continually reflective of the helping process, and supervision plays an essential role in supporting and facilitating this ongoing meaning-making with our clients.

Cultural Competency: Are We Doing It Right?

Cultural competency is defined as "a set of congruent practice skills, behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross cultural situations" (Lum, 2007). There is a need for social work practitioners to be aware of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that define cultural competency. My experiences within the context of Singapore reflect a possible lack of conscientious effort on the part of helping professionals to achieve culturally competency in their practice.

This article discusses the following areas:

1. Definition and meaning tied to cultural competency in local social work practice.
2. How cultural competency forms an important component of training for social work practitioners.
3. How supervision can be instrumental in supporting culturally competent practice.

With reference to the specifications provided by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2001), culture takes on a broad meaning that encompasses behavioural patterns, intergenerational passages, and particular group life experiences:

Culture implies the integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes the thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group; refers to the totality of ways being passed on from generation to generation; and 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. (Lum, 2007)

In comparison to this definition, practitioners in Singapore may lack depth in their dominant discourse when relating to a person of a different culture. Within my experiences in a family service centre for instance, I am constantly faced with questions such as “why are the Malays too lazy to go out to work?”, “why do the Chinese like to gamble their money away?” and “why do Indian men drink and beat up their wives?” These are humorous stereotypes that initially seem to be part of

harmless jest, but may in fact be self-limiting (not to mention unethical) and impede our ability to help our clients.

The Dominant Discourse in the Local Scene

Cultural competency has become a prominent aspect in the social work profession, particularly in the USA, where training for cultural competency is now mandated in social work education and is enshrined as a fundamental principle in the National Association of Social Workers' code of ethics (Abrams & Moi, as cited in Harrison et al., 2010). Ideas of "cultural sensitivity" were coined in response to the need to work in culturally appropriate ways with minority ethnic groups. Over time, these ideas have evolved to incorporate all groups at risk of social exclusion, defined by identity markers such as sexual orientation, disabilities, etc. (Harrison and Turner, 2010).

Within Singapore's multicultural environment, it is inevitable that social workers work cross-culturally with their clients. Singaporeans who are used to interacting across cultures may also take for granted the importance of being cross-culturally competent in an intentional manner.

Laird (as cited in Harrison et al., 2010) contends that social workers need to "learn about other cultures" to guard against "unintended racism." Cultures are continually in flux and social workers must address any unidimensional views of cultural identity.

Brian Fay's Philosophies and Their Relevance to Practice

Laird (as cited in Harrison et al., 2010) suggested that the path to cultural awareness is through a better understanding of our own social location. It is

imperative that one does not frame his/her perception of the client as 'the other' and positions him- or herself as an 'expert' to 'treat' clients. However, there are questions as to whether such an endeavour is feasible in actual practice. Brian Fay (1996) postulated that "to know others or even oneself is the ability to make sense of the other persons' experience" (p. 13). It is the ability to decipher the meaning of our clients' experiences that takes precedence.

I have observed that some practitioners may position themselves as 'more-knowing' than their clients and may 'take over' from the client and 'direct' what clients should or should not be doing. The practitioner may then feel that he/she is executing his/her job 'well' and 'helping' the clients, being trained with the knowledge and skills to take up that expert stance.

Fay (1996) discussed the idea of atomism, which is described as "a state of consciousness to which we have privileged access." Drawing from the earlier discussion about practitioners taking on the 'expert' position with clients: as much as one tries to be non-judgemental, there still exists a sense of bias within us towards others. As such, acknowledging that we cannot be free from having biases is a first step towards an attempt to make sense of other persons' experiences. This is connected with the idea of relational risk-taking raised by Mason (as cited in Flaskas et al., 2005), who highlights that if we can take the risk of challenging our clients

cross-culturally from respectful positions, we are more likely to develop collaborative, trusting relationships.

Anderson and Goolishian (as cited in Flaskas et al., 2005) define the concept of the “not-knowing” position as one which requires understanding, explanation and interpretation within the helping process and which is not limited by prior experience or theoretically informed truths and knowledge. Nonetheless, at times, it does appear that taking a “not-knowing” or “curious” stance is uncomfortable for some practitioners as it is perceived to reflect the “lack of knowledge, competency or even confidence” (p. 161) of the practitioner. In other words, it could make the practitioner seem less credible when he or she appears uncertain. This notion bears resemblance to Fay’s concept of perspectivism (1997), whereby “people may be living differently in the same world” (p. 30). There is an assumption here that there will always be sameness in differences, and conversely, differences in sameness. For example, a Malay practitioner and a Malay client may not articulate differences of values and beliefs due to the assumption that they subscribe to a similar frame of reference, i.e., Malay culture. However, given their unique experiences and individual socialization processes, this sameness may not be true, such as when the perceived social class differences between the social worker and client may form challenges within the client-helper collaborative process.

Fay’s (1997) ideas raise one main question: How can cultural competency become more visible and voiced in our daily conversations with clients? Training and

retraining may certainly be essential, but another critical element would be how supervision might play a part in enhancing cultural competency in practitioners.

Implications to Practice

As stated in the preceding section, there needs to be an awareness of our own social location as we practice. This is connected with the idea that, in order to develop oneself as a culturally competent practitioner, the first step is to be aware of one's own racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, and how these have influenced one's life experiences and outlooks. In my opinion, a practical way of reminding practitioners can be drawn from the mnemonic acronym, Social GRRACCES (gender, race, religion, age, ability, class, culture, ethnicity and sexuality), as postulated by Burnham (2008).

It is important that practitioners take on a position from which the aspects of Social GRRACCES could help remind us of the many strands that create a culture and that each one is important and may come into the foreground or background at different times. Coupled with this position, the stance of being curious or not knowing will bring our cultural competency to a new level. Relational risk-taking will also need to take place in order to create a deeper and different interaction process between practitioners and clients. In other words, there has to be a risk taken to voice the unvoiced (e.g., talking about potential cross-cultural difficulties with our clients) and to surface the unseen. How then can practitioners allow for critical inter-subjectivity as they practise in a culturally competent manner? As such, I believe that one possible way to facilitate this process could start from the supervisory relationship.

Is Supervision a Way to Facilitate Cultural Competency?

Supervision has always been a vital feature in social work practice. Given the ambiguity of what defines cultural competency and how it is being practised, supervision could be a first step towards supporting practitioners. McGoldrick (as cited in Campbell et al., 2002) stressed the importance of supervision in using theoretical frameworks to facilitate the development of cultural competency.

The demands for greater accountability for one's practice and standards of practice, and registration processes have brought into focus the need for a more formalized structure. Generally, cultural issues would be processed with our clients only when it becomes an obvious problem in the client-helper relationship. Supervision may assist in supporting and ensuring that social workers take a proactive stance in assessing cross-cultural issues with their clients at different stages of the helping process. According to Burnham and Harris (as cited in Campbell et al., 2002), there are three broad contexts in supervision: (a) the broad culture of the supervisory practice, (b) the culture within the supervisory relationship and (c) the culture within the helping relationship. The culture or position a particular agency takes in relation to supervision has a bearing on the intended outcomes of clinical practice. Should there be less emphasis on supervision by an agency, the space to work on cultural competency may be restrained.

The supervision process is about the process of deciphering the meaning of different experiences (Fay, 1996). Supervisors cannot assume that they know and have gone through what supervisees are experiencing. Although the role of the supervisor is somewhat defined as someone of superior knowledge, skills and experience in the field, this 'expert' position may not be exemplary nor entirely useful

to supervisees. This is especially so in regards to how they might position themselves with respect to their clients.

Borrowing the concepts underlined by feminist theory, a person's first point of resistance is the oppressor within. The "voice" is important to explore the duality of 'the victim' (supervisee or client) and 'the privileged' (supervisor or practitioner). As such, how can we minimize supervisees' reliance on supervisor's knowledge and expertise to the extent that it restrains their own creativity and capacity to expand their practice skills? In other words, the supervisory relationship can turn into one that is unidirectional and lopsided. This may compromise the social worker's perceived competency of working with their clients, and may be detrimental to the helping process. For example, in a situation where the supervisee is a Chinese male and the supervisor is a Malay female, the supervisee may look to his supervisor for answers when working with a Malay female client. This stems from his perception that the supervisor may have 'expert' knowledge of someone who is of similar gender and ethnicity. The supervisee's dependence on his supervisor as the expert may thwart the development of his own competencies towards cross-cultural effectiveness when working with his client. Hair and O'Donoghue (2009) are of the opinion that a social constructionist approach may create a supervisory relationship that honours cultural complexities. However, this does not mean that information about a different cultural group cannot be helpful. It is how practitioners choose to interpret and use them with

their clients that are central. It is important to unpack the potential meanings of cultural identities.

In essence, supervision training is also crucial to ensure that cultural competency does not continue to be overwhelmed by other aspects of social work practice. Locally, there is a recognized training programme for social work supervisors through the Family Resource and Training Centre (FRTC), and a manual for supervisors. This training programme and manual could be updated to include culturally-competent supervision. For instance, NASW has a set of standards for cultural competency which our local counterpart, the Singapore Association of Social Workers, may be able to adopt in years to come, together with an integrated manual on social work supervision.

Can Cultural Competency Be Learnt?

Critics have pointed out that although training in cultural competency is already a core requirement for practice in many health and welfare settings, there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of such training and whether culturally-competent practice actually improves service delivery. To date, no studies have systematically examined the effect of culturally-competent practice on outcomes of service users and there has been limited research conducted on what clients expect in terms of culturally-competent service delivery (as cited in Harrison et al., 2010).

Kleinman and Benson (as cited in Harrison et al., 2010) pointed out that it is difficult to operationalize cultural competency for research and training purposes. The skills, knowledge and attributes required for cultural competency are not clearly delineated in most policy documents and recent research suggests a lack of a common understanding of its meaning and relevance (as cited in Harrison et al., 2010). To sum up, it would appear that cultural competency is afforded significance in the literature

and in principle, but no one is quite sure what it is or what culturally competent practice translates to in actions and behaviour. In essence, as much as cultural competency is a subjective matter, there needs to be some form of an indicator or indicators to evaluate its effectiveness.

Conclusion: Moving Forward

Cultural competency is not a new phenomenon. Symbolically, cultural competency is equated with respect for difference and the inclusion of marginalized groups and individuals. This is the main essence of social work practice. Nonetheless, there appears to be a strong need for social work practice in Singapore to be reviewed. Undergraduate training may not be adequate to equip social work practitioners with the knowledge, skills and attitudes revolving around cultural competency. Ongoing training both within or outside individual agencies are crucial, and this has to be supported by a supervisory structure and process which is interspersed with conversations about cultural competency.

With the current developments towards accreditation and professionalization of social work in Singapore (Singapore Association of Social Work, 2010), more standards need to be documented and put in place. We can begin by influencing supervisors or seniors in the field, who may then translate their knowledge and skills to practitioners who will then exercise cultural competency in their helping relationship with clients. As this happens, influencing agencies to relook into this area of core competencies could be a huge step before any changes at the national level can be seen.

As Lum (2007) highlights, the emphasis is not so much on how to be culturally competent with clients, as that outcome will occur in the course of working with culturally diverse people, but rather on developing an awareness of our own

understanding of ourselves as a cultural people and on gaining competencies in helping others.

References

- Fay, B. (1996). *Contemporary philosophy of social science: a multicultural approach*. UK: Blackwell.
- Burnham, J., & Harris, Q. (2002). Cultural issues in supervision. In D. Campbell, & B. Mason, (Eds.). *Perspectives on supervision* (pp. 21–41). London: Karnac.
- Burnham, J., Palma, D. A., & Whitehouse, L. (2008). Learning as a context of differences and differences as a context to learning. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 39, 529–542.

- Hair, H. J., & O'Donoghue, K. (2009). Culturally relevant, socially just social work supervision: becoming visible through a social constructionist lens. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 18*, 70–88. Retrieved April 8, 2011, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15313200902874979>.
- Harrison, G., & Turner, R. (2011). Being a 'culturally competent' social worker: making sense of a murky concept in practice. *British Journal of Social Work, 41*, 333–350. Retrieved from <http://www.bjsw.oxfordjournals.org>.
- Lum, D. (2007). *Culturally competent practice: a framework for understanding diverse groups and justice issues* (3rd ed.). California: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Mason, B. (2005). *Relational risk-taking and the therapeutic relationship*. In C. Flaskas, B. Mason, & A. Perlesz (Eds.), *The space between: experience, context and process in the therapeutic relationship* (pp. 157–170). London: Karnac.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2006). *NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialworkers.org/practice/standards/naswculturalstandards.pdf>.
- Ritzer, G. (2007). *Contemporary sociological theory and its classical roots* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Singapore Association of Social Work. (2010). *Accreditation*. Retrieved May 9, 2014, from <http://accreditation.sasw.org.sg/>.