In Pursuit of Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice

By: Nur Hilyah Bte Saparin

Abstract

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

Cultural Competence – Are We Doing It Right?

Cultural competence 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 culturally competency. The author's experience within the local context may reflect a possible lack of conscientious effort on the part of helping professionals towards being culturally competent in their practice.

This article discusses the following areas:

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

With reference to the specification provided by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in 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 view of 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 lazy to go out to work?", "why do the Chinese like to gamble their money away?" and "why do the 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 competence has become a prominent aspect in the social work profession, particularly in the USA, where training for cultural competence 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 and 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, diabilities, etc (Harrison and Turner, 2010).

Within Singapore's multicultural environment, it is inevitable that social workers work cross culturally with their clients. Singaporeans 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 uni-dimensional views of cultural identity.

Brian Fay's Philosophies and Its 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 her perception of the client as "the other" and positions herself as an "expert" to treat the clients. However, there are questions as to whether such an endeavor 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". It is the ability to decipher the meaning of our clients' experiences that takes precedence.

I have observed that practitioners may position themselves as "more-knowing" than their clients and may play the role of "taking over" from the client and "directing" what they should or should not be doing. The practitioner may then feel that she is executing her job "well" and "helping" the clients, being trained with the knowledge and skills to take up that expert stance.

Fay (1996) discussed about 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-judgmental, there still exists a sense of bias within us towards others. As such, acknowledging that we cannot be free from having a bias is a first step towards an attempt to make sense of the other persons' experience.

This is connected with the idea of relational risk taking brought about 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) defines the concept of the "not-knowing" position as one which requires understanding, explanation and interpretation within the helping process 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 "lack of knowledge, competency or even confidence" of that practitioner. In other words, it could make the practitioner seem less credible when he or she appears uncertain.

This notion bears resemblance Fay's concept of perspectivism (1997), where he discussed how "people may be living differently in the same world". There is an assumption here that there will always be sameness in differences, and conversely differences in sameness.

For example, a Malay practitioner and Malay client may not articulate differences of values and beliefs due to the assumption that they subscribe to a similar frame of reference (Malay Culture). However, given their unique experiences and individual socialization processes, this sameness may not be true. For example, the perceived social class differences between the social worker and client may form challenges within the client helper collaborative process.

Fay's ideas brings up one main question: How can cultural competence 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 competence in practitioners.

Implications to Practice

However, 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 Social GRRAACCES (gender, race, religion, age, ability, class, culture, ethnicity and sexuality) as postulated by Burnham (2008).

It is important that practitioners take on a position where the aspects of Social GRRAACCES 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 (for e.g. talking about potential cross cultural difficulties with our clients) and to surface the unseen. How then can practitioners allow for critical intersubjectivity as they practice 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 Competence?

Supervision has always been a vital feature in social work practice. Given the ambiguity of what defines cultural competence 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 frames to facilitate the development of cultural competence.

The demand for greater accountability for one's practice, standards of practice, and registration processes has brought into focus the need for a more formalized structure. Generally, cultural issues would only 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: the broad culture of the supervisory practice, the

culture within the supervisory relationship and 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 competence may be restrained.

The supervision process is about the process of deciphering the meaning of difference experiences (Fay, 1996). Supervisors cannot assume that he or she has knows and has 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 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 practitioner 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 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" while working with a Malay female client. This is due to 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 blur 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 is central. It is important to unpack the potential meanings of cultural identity.

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 recognised training for social work supervisors through the Family Resource and Training Centre (FRTC) together with the manual for supervisors. As such, this training course and manual could be reviewed to allow for a more updated guide to culturally competent supervision. For instance, NASW has a set of standards for cultural competence and this would be an example that our local counterparts may be able to follow in years to come together with an integrated manual on social work supervision.

Can Cultural Competency be learnt?

Critics have pointed out that despite being a core requirement for practice in many health and welfare settings, there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of training in cultural competence and whether this form of practice actually improves service delivery. To date, no studies have systematically examined outcomes for 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 competence for research and training purposes. The skills, knowledge and attributes required for cultural competence 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 competence is afforded significant importance in the literature and in principle, but no one is quite sure what it is or what it looks like. In essence, as much as cultural competence is a subjective matter, there needs to be some form of indicators to evaluate its effectiveness.

Conclusion – Moving Forward

Cultural competency is not a new phenomenon. Symbolically, cultural competence is equated with respect for difference and the inclusion of marginalised groups and individuals. This is the main essence of social work practice

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 competence. Ongoing training both within or outside individual agencies are crucial; and this has to be supported by a supervision structure and process which is interspersed with cultural competence conversations.

With the current developments in the Singaporean Social Work context in the steps towards accreditation and professionalization of social work (www.sasw.org.sg), 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 competence 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 effecting any change of difference at the national level.

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.

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