Education, Social Work: Cultural Competence

What We Know

› Cultural competence is a fundamental tenet of the social work profession\(^{(11)}\)
› In its “Statement of Ethical Principles,” the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) asserts, “Social workers should recognise and respect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the societies in which they practise, taking account of individual, family, group, and community differences”\(^{(6)}\)
› The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) defines cultural competence as the “process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each” (p. 13)\(^{(11)}\)
› As immigration increases globally, social workers must have the ability to work effectively with persons of different cultures
  • In 2016, 596,000 immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers arrived in the United Kingdom\(^{(10)}\)
  • In the United States, there are over 43.3 million immigrants (13.5% of the population). This figure includes foreign-born naturalized U.S. citizens and non-citizens (legal permanent residents, unauthorized migrants, and residents who are in the United States on temporary visas)\(^{(16)}\)
  • The proportion of foreign-born persons in Canada is estimated to be just over 20% of the population\(^{(15)}\)
› Scholars consistently recognize the need for social workers to engage in an ongoing evaluation of their own cultural backgrounds, values, and prejudices as they strive to be culturally competent professionals. Without this ongoing evaluation, social workers may allow their personal beliefs to taint their work with their clients and may not provide the best therapeutic interventions because of this possible counter transference (the social worker’s feelings toward the client)\(^{(5)}\)
› Coursework on cultural competence for social work students should include what is considered the foundational knowledge of cultural competency, which includes the following:\(^{(5)}\)
  • Definitions of diversity, including diversity of race, skin color, gender, ethnicity, national origin, religious beliefs, age, sexual orientation, mental or physical disability, marital status, political beliefs, and language
  • An examination of power, privilege, and oppression and their impact on individuals
  • The topics of racism, sexism, ableism, and ethnocentrism
› Much of the literature on cultural competency for social workers focuses on the development of practice skills
  • Experiential learning is important to support the development of skills and confidence needed to apply the conceptual understanding of cultural competence gained in the classroom to real-lifesituations\(^{(13)}\)
• Skill development is best taught in the classroom and in field education settings through direct observation and feedback, shadowing, videotaping role plays, and case conferences.

• Experiential learning and service learning opportunities are another way for social work students to become cross-cultural learners and culturally competent practitioners. A student might, for example, spend time in a Canadian First Nations community by attending cultural activities and festivals within that community.

• The chapter on skill development in the social work text *Culturally Competent Practice: A Framework for Understanding Diverse Groups and Justice Issues* (Lum, 2011) divides the development of skills in cultural competence into three areas:

  – Process skills: which are skills utilized to establish rapport and trust with the client, including using reflection, probing, and restatements and helping the client articulate what is on his or her mind
  – Conceptualization skills: which include identifying themes in what the client is sharing, choosing appropriate strategies to address clients’ goals, and learning how to recognize improvement in clients
  – Personalization skills: which include being non-defensive when receiving criticism from a client, respecting clients, and being comfortable with clients’ feelings

• A cultural competency model widely used in social work education is Burchum’s Cultural Competence Model, a model that presumes that cultural competence is developed through the nonlinear (meaning not in any particular order) acquisition of six competencies:

  • Cultural awareness: learning how culture impacts and shapes values and beliefs
  • Cultural knowledge: information about different cultures (facts and data)
  • Cultural understanding: insight gained by examining other cultures
  • Cultural sensitivity: respecting and valuing cultural diversity
  • Cultural skill: ability to effectively communicate with persons of other cultures
  • Cultural proficiency: sharing the cultural knowledge gained through education and scholarship

• NASW Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice are important to review continually in the classroom (i.e., ethics and values, self-awareness, cross-cultural knowledge, cross-cultural skills, service delivery, empowerment and advocacy, diverse workforce, professional education, language diversity, and cross-cultural leadership).

• Oral history projects may be assigned to help social work students develop cultural competence.

  • Students gather narratives from persons in a particular cultural community about their experiences as members of that community (both concerning and hopeful experiences)
  • Students ask members of the community how they would like to see life made better for members of that community
  • The assignment culminates in student-created programs of action that are developed based on the ideas received from community members. Students receive feedback from classmates and the instructor
  • Through this process, students learn how to listen to community members and advocate on their behalf.

• In an effort to help social work students practice cultural competence with immigrant families, a university started an initiative called the Immigrant Child Welfare Project (ICWFP).

  • The ICWFP educational model includes field placements for social work students in a local elementary school, child protective services agency, and hospital, all of which have diverse populations; student-learning contracts and portfolios; and multicultural content throughout the social work curriculum
  • Students work as interns in the school, agency, and hospital and participate in a seminar with fellow interns and faculty supervisors for further work and reflection on the goals of the model (i.e., grow in self-efficacy, increase comfort level in using cultural competency skills, increase knowledge of their organizations’ policies and structure)
  • The ICWFP model has been well received by both faculty and students. Initial conclusions are that students are increasing their cultural competency skills (as evidenced by pre- and post-tests) as well as their level of confidence in their ability to work with diverse populations

• Social work education is beginning to incorporate “intergroup dialogue encounters” (a facilitated face-to-face encounter between two or more social identity groups with the purpose of creating new levels of understanding or relating).

  • Research is showing how this tool of “intergroup dialogue encounters” is enabling individuals to reflect thoughtfully not only on the differences within the groups but also recognize and reflect upon the collective narratives of the groups. It also is helping individuals move from thinking about the “other” to thinking more about themselves—their own prejudices and misconceptions.
Researchers found the following cultural assessment tools to be the best fit when evaluating social work students’ cultural competence in the social work field. They can be used as the basis of pre- and post-tests in diversity courses in a social work program or to assess social work students’ cultural competency upon graduation from a social work program:

- Ethnic-Competence-Skill Model in Psychological Interventions
- Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale
- Multicultural Counseling Inventory
- Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale

**What We Can Do**

Internationally, social workers should practice with awareness of and adherence to the social work principles of respect for human rights and human dignity, social justice, and professional conduct as described in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Statement of Ethical Principles, as well as the national code of ethics that applies in the country in which they practice. For example, in the United States, social workers should adhere to the NASW Code of Ethics core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence; and become knowledgeable of the NASW ethical standards as they apply to cultural competence and practice accordingly.

- Learn about cultural competence within social work education so we can accurately assess our clients’ personal characteristics and health education needs; share this information with our colleagues
- Develop an awareness of our own cultural values, beliefs, and biases, and develop knowledge about the histories, traditions, and values of our clients. Adopt treatment methodologies that reflect the cultural needs of the client
- Attend continuing education and professional development workshops on cultural competency
- Continually examine our values, biases, and prejudices and how they impact our social work practice
- Utilize online resources, including those offered by the NASW, [https://www.socialworkers.org/](https://www.socialworkers.org/)

**DSM 5 Codes**

[None]

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**Coding Matrix**

References are rated using the following codes, listed in order of strength:

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<td>SR</td>
<td>Published systematic or integrative literature review</td>
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<td>RCT</td>
<td>Published research (randomized controlled trial)</td>
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<td>Published research (not randomized controlled trial)</td>
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**References**


