

THE FUTURE OF MULTICULTURAL SOCIAL WORK

Rowena Fong

Abstract: *Multicultural social work has been evolving over the last forty years despite challenges in limited knowledge, insufficient resources, and inadequate infusion into the curriculum. Discussions continue about appropriate conceptual frameworks, culturally sensitive terms, traditional and indigenous practice approaches and treatments, and relevant outcome measures and evaluation methods. Future directions foster the inclusion of cultural values as strengths. Intersectionality guides practice approaches and systems of care. Service learning requirements, national ethnic resource centers, and ethnic studies dual degree programs are innovative initiatives yet to be fully integrated into social work curriculum.*

Keywords: *immigrants, refugees, intersectionality, biculturalization of interventions*

INTRODUCTION

Multicultural social work has been evolving over the last 40 years since the Council on Social Work Education, in the 1960's, set forth standards of nondiscrimination in schools of social work (Newsome, 2004). Over time the struggle has been to establish cultural diversity requirements in the schools of social work, despite encountering the challenges of limited knowledge, insufficient resources, inadequate infusion, inconsistent application, and resistance from administrators and educators who do not fully support building curriculum on minority groups of color (Newsome, 2004; Gutierrez, Zuniga, & Lum, 2004). However, since social work is a profession committed to oppressed populations and social justice issues, the advances in multicultural social work education during this era are noteworthy.

Terms and definitions related to multicultural social work have evolved. In the 1970's the dual perspective (Norton, 1978) challenged the notion that there was only one way of viewing things—that the perspective of minority persons of color does differ from the majority worldview. In the 1980's the concept of the cross-cultural system of care (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Issacs, 1989) forced social work providers and agencies at the macro level of practice to take into account ethnic minority clients' needs and offer culturally appropriate treatments across different systems of care in the various human service disciplines and organizations (Delgado, 1998; Lecca, Quervalu, Nunes, & Gonzales, 1998). In the 1990's the notion of cultural competence (Fong & Furuto, 2001; Lum, 2003; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) closely examined the characteristics of the social worker's self-awareness, ethnic sensitivity, and approach to practice (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999; Fong, Boyd, & Browne, 1999). It also forced practitioners to review the appropriateness of treatments to see if they reflected the cultural values and indigenous interventions of the ethnic minority populations served (Fong, Boyd, & Browne, 1999).

Discussions continue about appropriate conceptual frameworks, culturally sensitive

Rowena Fong is Professor and Director, Center for Asian American Studies, School of Social Work, University of Texas Austin, Austin, TX 78712.

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terms, definitions, and assessments, indigenous micro-, mezzo- and macro- practice approaches, and relevant outcome measures and evaluation methods (Fong & Furuto, 2001; Guadalupe & Lum, 2005). Newsome (2004) summarizes the state of the art in dilemmas still confronting multicultural social work, "Although identified as important more than 2 decades ago, multicultural education and competence remain a hot topic for the new millennium. While every author or educator may not agree on how this process should be carried out, most concur that it is important for the helping professional" (p. 5).

CURRENT CONTEXT

American society is becoming increasingly multiracial with growing immigrant and refugee groups (Balgopal, 2000; Fong, 2004; Delgado, Jones, & Rohani, 2005; Segal, 2002). Census data for the year 2000 identify the number of nonwhites in the United States in the year 2000 as 211, 460, 626 total white, including Hispanic / Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Foreign-born individuals now constitute 1 out of 10 members of the population in the United States, with the largest growing population Latino and Mexican Americans (Zuniga, 2004).

This rise of ethnic diversity in the population has forced social workers to increase their knowledge base about peoples and countries outside of the United States. Interpreters and translators are routinely included in assessment tools and ways of interviewing clients. Despite limited resources, services have been expanded to include undocumented immigrants, refugees, asylees, unaccompanied refugee minors, and victims of human trafficking (Busch, Fong, & Williamson, 2004; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Webb, 2001).

Poverty, lack of financial and social supports, tendencies towards substance abuse and domestic violence plague these families (Cohen, 2000; Ewalt, Freeman, Kirk, & Poole, 1996). Immigrants and refugees join an already economically challenged population of American-born ethnic minority families (Choi, 2001; Fong, 2004; Dhooper & Moore, 2001). Underemployment, racial profiling, glass ceiling discriminations, and model minority stereotypes are also often problematic for American-born families of color who are middle class and part of the workforce (Kivisto & Rundblad, 2000; See, 1998).

Problem-solving approaches to these issues may preclude natural and indigenous ways of handling problems in each ethnic group's context. Evidenced-based practices, while important to ascertain effective outcomes, may not include strategies recognizing shamans, acupuncture, and peyote as valid treatments or acceptable social services (Choi, 2001; Jung, 1998; Weaver, 2005). These are only a few of the current unresolved dilemmas still inadequately addressed in the area of multicultural social work.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We can build on these 40 years of progress as we advance the issues of multicultural social work in years to come. In the next quarter century attention needs to be focused more intensively on the complex diversity of the makeup and identity of the multicultural people served (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Winters, & DeBose, 2003). Assessments and interventions need to be better integrated with clients' cultural values and indigenous practices (Fong, Boyd, & Browne, 1999; Fong, 2004; Webb, 2001). Evaluations of practices need to be more creative in allowing for natural helping processes used in the ethnic

communities. Finally, better linkages need to occur between the systems of services and among the educators, practitioners, and researchers who interact with these diverse groups (Guadalupe & Lum, 2005; Fong, McRoy, & Ortiz Hendricks, in press).

Complex Diversity of Multicultural Persons

Multicultural, for the sake of this discussion, focuses mainly on race and ethnicity although the characteristics related to gender, sexual orientation, social class, and religion are also important as intersecting variables. In defining multicultural one must, in addition, note the between-group differences and within-group differences in ethnic groups. Historically people of color were divided into white and non-white. The recent Census of 2000 offers six race categories with an option for "two or more races" (p.1), which allows for those who are mixed or multiracial persons to self-classify their identification (U.S. Census, Bureau, 2000; Winters & DeBose, 2003). The identity of the multicultural individuals warrants much more attention since clients are frequently classified into convenience categories, heedless of complexities, resulting in a social work practice process, which lends itself to result in poor and inaccurate assessments and interventions.

Ethnic groups themselves embody variations, as between African Americans, Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, Latino and Mexican Americans, and First Nations Peoples and Native Americans (Delgado, 1998; Fong, 2001; See, 1998; Weaver, 2005). Within the Asian American group alone are East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipinos), South Asians (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi), and Southeast Asians (Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Thai, Burmese, Malaysians and Indonesians) and in each of these sub-groups are further—often quite radical—distinctions.

Immigrants and refugees are a growing population differentiated by their statuses, such as documented or undocumented, asylee, and unaccompanied refugee minor (Busch, Fong, & Williams, 2004; Delgado, Jones, & Rohani, 2005). The human trafficking situation compounds the issue when the victim is incorrectly labeled as illegal rather than treated with the protective rights due her or him (Busch, Fong, & Williams, 2004). Even the American-born children of such families are still very tied to homelands with transnational issues compounded by generational issues.

The distinctions between American-born, immigrant and refugee (Fong & Mokuau, 1994) are likely to become increasingly critical, and assessments, interventions, and evaluations will have to reflect this complexity. As for any other client, ethnicity, race, and status are to be taken into account, along with social class, gender, sexual orientation and religion. In sum, there are many more, and more complex, variables to consider in understanding the multicultural client than social work practitioners may be accustomed to.

Assessments and Interventions with Cultural Values and Indigenous Practices

Theoretical frameworks, which guide the practice of doing assessments and implementing interventions, will have to be changed beyond the more commonly used strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1997) and ecological model (Germain, 1979). Social environments of origin are affecting the human behaviors of our clients and more attention is needed

for culturally diverse human behaviors and social environments (Fong, 2004). Additional theory building is needed to reflect the multicultural social environments, especially of the homelands, from which many immigrants and refugees come.

Cultural values (Lum, 2003; Fong, 1999) are important assets and resources to multicultural clients. These have routinely been ignored in the intake and investigative assessment processes of social work. Fong, Boyd, and Browne (1999) advocate using cultural values as strengths and assets to be assessed and used in treatment planning and intervention implementation. They also write of the need for culturally competent interventions using the biculturalization of interventions, which combine indigenous practices with western interventions.

Evaluation of Practice and Natural Helping Processes

By incorporating more indigenous treatments and interventions, the evaluation system of practice needs to be carefully chosen and often times modified to accurately measure the effectiveness of these nontraditional practices. Delgado (1998) writes, "These principles reinforce the importance of flexibility, innovation, and the critical role 'nontraditional setting play in the lives of Latino elders' (p.33). He cites Heath and McLaughlin (1993) who "validate these perspectives: 'Effective programs often provide activities in nontraditional settings, at nontraditional hours, and with nontraditional personnel, and pay little attention to orthodox boundaries of this service sector, bureaucratic compartments, or professional parameters. The program and the terms on which they are offered take their shape from the needs and contexts of those with whom they work rather than from bureaucratic guidelines, accountability precepts, or objectives formulated at geographic and culturally remove from the local contexts....'"(p.62). Delgado (1998) concludes "Researchers must be prepared to engage in activities and enter arenas/settings that are totally new to them!" (p. 33).

Linkages Between Systems of Services

Because the problems for multicultural clients are becoming more complex, the social service delivery system can no longer afford to not collaborate more intensively and extensively. For example, problems in child welfare regularly overlap with issues in substance abuse, domestic violence, or mental health (Straussner, 2001; Fong, McRoy, Ortiz Hendricks, in press). Since the child welfare system serves a disproportionate number of African American children (McRoy & Vick, in press) and the need for kinship care is evolving, sustaining partnerships must be developed between social work practitioners in child development, child welfare, gerontology, substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health.

A developing concept and practice of linking these systems is intersectionality. Fong (2004) writes about culturally competent contextual social work practice and intersectionality. She advocates the need take all the informal and formal services used to help multicultural clients and use an intersectionality framework, which includes cultural values, biculturalization of interventions, indigenous helping strategies, and nontraditional practices and services as guideposts to link the services. Lum (2003) speaks of internal and external intersectionality, focusing on individuals, families and social group memberships,

which are interconnected and interrelated. Intersectionality needs to be adopted as the standard approach to offering services and linking systems integrally and consistently.

Linkages Among Educators, Practitioners, and Researchers

Educators, practitioners, and researchers in social work need to have better linkages than what currently exists. This can be done through requiring service learning projects, strengthening affiliations with national ethnic research centers, and developing joint degree programs between social work and ethnic studies.

Service learning is a means by which students, from elementary school level to higher education, can be educated and serve the community. The National Service Learning Clearinghouse offer resources to students, faculty, practitioners, community leaders, policy makers, and researchers in various areas in which students can be involved in communities outside the classroom and receive educational credit. Unlike field practicums and volunteer placements, service learning requirements in the classroom force instructor and student to engage in critical thinking dialogue during the service learning experience. Teachers can immediately integrate the community learning experiences into discussions, assignments in class. Student, teacher, and agency practitioner are all concurrently responsible for the students' learning. This integrative approach is necessary with multicultural clients and reflects intersectionality of classroom and community.

Besides service learning requirements in social work courses focused on multicultural clients, another way to link educators, practitioners, and researchers is to develop or strengthen the affiliations to the national ethnic research centers. Social work departments should have collaborations doing joint research projects with ethnic research centers such as, the National Resource Center for Asian American Mental Health at the University of California at Davis or the Center for African and African American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, or the University of Kansas's Center for Indigenous Nations Studies. National social work research societies, such as the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) and the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR) should continue to seek and develop ongoing research collaborations with the national ethnic research centers.

A final suggestion for future developments in multicultural social work education is for schools of social work to develop degree programs with ethnic studies departments. Social work has successfully established many collaborative degree programs between professional schools of law, business, public health, and religion. But what are yet to be explored are joint programs between social work and ethnic studies. There are many undergraduate and graduate degree granting ethnic studies programs on campuses throughout the United States. Both ethnic studies and social work believe in tenets of social justice, activism and advocacy. Linking social work with ethnic studies makes for a better informed, stronger educator, practitioner, or researcher ready to be involved in social justice issues concerning the multicultural clients.

CONCLUSION

Multicultural social work has progressed in the last 40 years but must yet move deeper

into acknowledging the complexity of the populations and using the correct terminology, which reflects the multicultural clients' differential statuses and identities.

Assessments and interventions need to incorporate more indigenous cultural values and natural helping modalities. Field components need to develop more multicultural settings and integrate international placements as a normal part of field and classroom teaching. Social systems of care need to always include the intersections of agencies rather than the current approach of operating in isolation. Linkages between education, practice, and research are going to require more of an emphasis on using the multicultural client as the main guide and informant.

Creative collaborations need to occur between schools of social work, national ethnic research centers, and ethnic studies departments. Clients have been the persons acted upon – that role needs to be reversed so that multicultural clients become co-consultants in assessments, interventions and evaluations. Multiculturalism, in brief, needs to be more of an equal playing field. The diversity of the population, with growing numbers of immigrants, refugees and interracial marriages, is going to mandate that social work education move to another model of perspective-taking. Fong (2001) proposes a shift toward making indigenous and traditional “cultural values the foundation of performing assessments, implementing interventions, and conducting evaluations. It also requires a biculturalization or multiculturalization of practice methods, incorporating the norms and practices of the appropriate ethnic groups, which will then be supplemented by Euro-practices. This is the shift in perspective that needs to guide the development on cultural competency as the helping professions move into the twenty-first century” (p.7).

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Author's Note

Address correspondence to: Rowena Fong PhD, University of Texas, School of Social Work, 1 University Station D3500, Austin, TX 78712-0358. e-mail: rfong@mail.utexas.edu