

Faculty Attitudes Regarding Student's Preparedness for Culturally Sensitive Social Work Practice in the United States

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In the United States, social work education has a mandate to train students for culturally sensitive social work practice. This mandate is becoming increasingly important as the United States becomes increasingly multicultural. This study presents data that assesses the degree to which social work education is fulfilling this mandate by exploring faculty perceptions regarding the preparedness of Master of Social Work students for culturally sensitive social work. In addition to the presentation of data, a literature review explores the history and role of culturally sensitive social work education in the United States.

Attitudes, cultural sensitivity, social work practice, United States of America

INTRODUCTION

As North American society becomes increasingly diverse, it is essential that social workers develop increased competence in working with diverse populations. While training students to work with diverse populations is a key value in social work education in the United States and a curricular mandate of regulating bodies (CSWE, 1998b; NASW, 1996), little is known about the degree to which students are prepared for culturally sensitive social work education. This study seeks to provide data to help answer this question by exploring faculty perceptions regarding the preparedness of Master of Social Work (MSW) students for culturally sensitive social work. First, a literature review explores the role of culturally sensitive social work education to provide both a context and rationale for the study. Second, the paper presents data concerning faculty perceptions regarding student preparedness for culturally sensitive social work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The push to make social work services sensitive to those from various ethnic and cultural groups dates back nearly a century. In 1909, Tucker was one of the first social work educators in the United States to suggest that social work education include information about the experiences of Black clients. The author suggested that social work students learnt about racism in order to help Blacks deal with its effects. It was indicative of the times that the emphasis was not on the amelioration of racism or the provision of culturally sensitive practice, but on helping Blacks to adapt and cope with social ills.

In the 1960s the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) began to encourage the inclusion of minority content into the social work curriculum. Early efforts focused on the infusion of

culturally relevant material into specific courses such as Human Behaviour in the Social Environment or Racism. Lee and Greene (1999) refer to this model as the cultural competence approach. Early integration of minority content focused on cultural differences and helping social work students understand how these differences impacted on the lives of their clients. Later developments in cultural competence focused on developing specific interventions designed for specific groups. Nwachuku and Ivey (1991) discussed this approach as it applied to the field of counselling:

Culture-specific counseling asks such questions as "How does a particular culture view the helping relationships?" "How do they solve problems traditionally?" "Are there new specific counseling skills and ways of thinking that make better sense in the frame of reference of the culture than typical Euro-north American systems?" The goal is to decrease negative stereotyping and generate a more complex understanding rather than oversimplify cultures. Culture-specific counseling begins with an understanding of the culture and then moves to the definition of concrete skills and techniques for implementing the theory. (Nwachuku and Ivey, 1991, p.107)

The strength of this approach lies in its specificity and its responsiveness to specific problem contexts. Its specificity and focus on skills have been marked improvements over models that focused on knowledge pertaining only to cultural differences. The problem is that in an increasingly complex and multicultural society, it is not possible for social workers to learn culturally competent means of helping all client populations. Ifill (1989) suggests that minority educators realised the importance of infusing minority content into the Human Behaviour in the Social Environment sequence, which had the unforeseen consequence of an over-reliance on intellectually-based learning about minority experiences. Traditional courses dealing with racism and minority content were essentially intellectual or cognitive in nature, to the exclusion of learning that included affective (Fox, 1983) or skill-based (Proctor and Davis, 1983) components. This over-reliance on cognitive learning did not allow for social workers to develop their professional use of self in regard to culturally sensitive practice. The necessity of understanding the discrepancies between one's own values and those of a client from another culture demanded an exploration that was less cognitive and more affective.

To this end, Granger and Portner (1985) developed a framework for the infusion of ethnic and gender sensitive material into social work curriculum that was composed of two major elements: mental and emotional interactions (intra-psychic variables) and societal interactions (macro variables). Both elements were aimed at correcting students' misconceptions (perceptual or cognitive distortions) about women and ethnic minorities. These authors made a valuable contribution to the understanding of culturally sensitive social work and directly informed the development of the questionnaire for this study by stressing the need for students to learn both micro and macro variables that affected culturally sensitive practice.

Gutierrez, Yeakley and Ortega (2000) suggested infusing material on Latino issues throughout the social work curriculum. In their literature review, which encompassed 25 years, the authors identified 273 articles that focused on Latinos. They argued that these articles should be infused throughout different sequences in Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) programs. These authors stressed the importance of students acquiring knowledge about the values and cultural patterns of Latinos, as well as relevant skills to work with this population:

We must increase our cultural competence by recognising gaps in knowledge and making efforts to address them. In developing our knowledge and skills, we must always consider how well students are incorporating knowledge and understanding of both the distinctive cultural patterns and disadvantaged status of Latinos into their work. (Gutierrez, Yeakley and Ortega, 2000, p.555)

Ifill (1989) stressed the importance of integrating both the affective and skill-based approaches. The author suggested using structured learning experiences within the students' field placements to help them learn to examine their feelings about working with people from different cultures. The processing of affect in the context of the practice class helped students learn about their own biases and prejudices in a less threatening setting. This experiential approach to teaching culturally sensitive social work was another factor that is explored in the questionnaire developed for this study, as it represents one of the vehicles utilised to teach this material.

In order to develop further students' professional use of self, Fox (1983) suggested that students should be introduced to working with clients from other cultures in a pre-field placement practicum, so they might develop a level of emotional insight before their placements in order to begin to become effective helpers. He stressed that in culturally sensitive practice it was essential to learn how to feel with clients, not just **know** about feelings, further stressing the importance of affective learning. The utilisation of experiential approaches to teaching culturally sensitive social work proposed by Fox (1983) and Ifill (1989) is explored in the questionnaire developed for this study, as they represent important vehicles that may be used in teaching this material.

Garcia and Van Soest (1997) conducted the most recent empirical investigation related to culturally sensitive social work education. The authors gathered data from tape-recorded interviews with 43 MSW students enrolled in a course on diversity and oppression. This exploratory study sought to answer several questions. First, what was the effect of this course on students' understanding of their own social identity? Second, what cognitive and affective changes related to the subject matter resulted from their participation in this course? Third, what barriers to and resources for confronting oppression did they learn in the process? The study was exploratory and used a non-probability convenience sample. One of the key limitations of this study was its sample. Results of research using a non-probability sample of social work students from one social work program might not be generalisable to other social work students at other schools. Also, the very fact that the students were studied in the context of their diversity course might have led to biased results, as students might have been self conscious of their responses.

Data were gathered prior to students taking the class in three areas: social identity and prejudice; institutional factors of oppression; and structural causes and consequences of oppression. The authors noted several important findings based on their qualitative analysis of tape-recorded interviews with students conducted both before and after the course. First, students' most important learning related to their own affect. That is, the emotional experience of their coming to grips with their own identity was at least as important as the cognitive content about ethnic and cultural differences. All 23 white, non-Jewish students reported that their ethnic identities had changed over the course of the semester. At least one student remarked that this reformulation of identity led to her perceiving herself as more likely to effect real client change. Many students postulated that their own internalised fears and prejudices would have posed significant barriers in working with oppressed client groups had they not been challenged in the process of the course. In spite of the limitations of this study in regard to generalisability, this study is important as it supports the need for culturally sensitive social work education that does not rely solely on the teaching of cognitive knowledge concerning cultural differences and the minority experience. Social work educators must understand the nature of how ethnic identity and racial prejudices are constructed and maintained within each student. This contention is supported by Pinderhughes (1988) who posits that social workers with positive ethnic identities of their own are most adequately prepared for culturally sensitive practice.

An extensive literature review found only one study that directly attempted to assess the attitudes of social work students and faculty concerning culturally sensitive social work practice. In 1969, a committee was appointed by the Center for the Study of Social Work Practice of the University of

Pennsylvania School of Social Work to assess how the new doctoral program (DSW) dealt with the teaching of content related to the minority experience. The study represents a self-assessment of the school's newly formed DSW program (Beidler and Chalmers, 1978). The researchers sought to study faculty and students' understanding of the meaning of the 'Minority thrust mission' of the School, its particular implementation within courses, and their individual satisfaction with its implementation. Questionnaires were constructed to ascertain faculty perception of how the 'Minority thrust mission' should or should not be implemented in the program. The concept of minority thrust is similar to the construct of culturally sensitive social work. 'Minority thrust mission' is defined as the school's commitment to social change: the eradication of racism, the recruitment of minority faculty, recruitment and financial support of minority students, and the infusion of minority experiences into the course content.

The authors found that there was congruence between the responses of students and faculty regarding both the importance and understanding of 'minority thrust'. The study found that many of the mechanisms for meeting the mission of the program were not structured or formalised. It was seen as the responsibility of each faculty member to infuse content on minority issues and racism into the curriculum. Overall, faculty were found to prefer this infusion method to the option of a specific course on racism. Faculty in this study also rejected the notion of having a course specifically designed to teach culturally competent principles, which represents another model of teaching this material. However, the sample size of the study represents a profound limitation in our ability to generalise from these data. Even had the study been of a representative sample of social work programs or faculty, more than 20 years have passed since the study was conducted, and many socio/cultural factors, and changes within social work education itself, may have altered faculty attitudes concerning culturally sensitive practice.

This study informs the development of one of the hypotheses in this study, as it shows a preference by faculty for the infusion model of teaching culturally sensitive social work practice. It follows that if the structure of the program concerning culturally sensitive social work education is more congruent with faculty preferences, faculty are more likely to utilise culturally sensitive teaching materials.

In a related study, Schwartz, Fluckiger and Weisman (1977) conducted a pilot project to help infuse culturally competent educational principles into social work training. This project was undertaken to help MSW students develop culturally competent and effective skills for working with Puerto Ricans in New York. Their analysis consisted of qualitative methods that were predominately unstructured in nature. They did not utilise systematic research methodology. Therefore, their work could be considered to be more a program evaluation rather than empirical. Most of the data presented was narrative. The authors suggested that the problem with cross-cultural education was not the lack of information about other cultural groups, but the lack of a good framework to integrate such material. The authors presented a model where the role of the educator was that of a facilitator of educational experiences designed to effect two domains of learning, cognitive and affective.

The authors' findings indicated that social work students' attitudes toward Puerto Rican culture and lifestyle prior to the program were largely negative and that they demonstrated a lack of understanding of Puerto Rican values, norms, and behaviour. The researchers concluded that the combined didactic training in affective and cognitive domains, along with the experience of living with a family, led to an increase in empathy toward Puerto Ricans. They concluded that students who participated in this type of training were more likely to be more sensitive and effective practitioners.

The authors made recommendations for providing cross-cultural experiences, including summer programs for a semester in Puerto Rico, or living with a Puerto Rican family. Also, they

recommend knowledge and skill building to including instruction on language, history, culture, socio-economic status, migration history, homeland geography, group customs, tradition, and behavioural norms. On the affective level, they recommend the teaching of and acceptance of other social systems and beliefs, and of the legitimacy of cultural norms that differed from that of the students.

Any discussion of attitudes would be remiss without the inclusion of the important work of Bandura (1977), who theorised that one of the elements to successful behavioural responses was the sense of self-efficacy, the perception that people could, by their own personal efforts, bring about a desired outcome. In a study of adult phobics, Bandura, Adams and Beyer (1977) demonstrated that a person's belief or perception of success in achieving behavioural aims was the most significant factor in clinical success. Many empirical studies supported the contention that the perceptions and attitudes pertaining to the efficacy of a helper or teacher were highly correlated with the success or failure of their clients or students (Austin and Walster, 1974; Bandura, Jeffery and Gajdos, 1975; Lick and Bootzin, 1975).

The empirical studies that have been conducted are dated and do not explore the current realities in preparing students for culturally sensitive social work practice. This study seeks to fill this large gap in the knowledge by exploring faculty attitudes about culturally sensitive social work education.

METHODOLOGY

Design

For the current study, the investigator constructed a questionnaire that operationalised concepts regarding faculty perceptions of student preparedness for culturally sensitive practice in several domains. This design was chosen because exploratory quantitative methods, such as surveys, have advantages over qualitative methods in that they represent an economy of design, a rapid turn-around in data collection, and the ability to utilise quantitative methods of analysis (Creswell, 1994). The main research question that this paper addresses is: What are the attitudes of social work faculty regarding the curriculum in preparing students for culturally sensitive practice?

Sample

The study population consisted of full-time faculty in graduate schools of social work in the United States. The sampling method used was a probability sample of all full-time faculty in Council of Social Work Education accredited Master of Social Work (MSW) programs. Currently, there are nearly 2000 full-time faculty in accredited MSW programs. Statistical analysis indicated that a suitable sample of this population would be 325 participants. To account for typically low response rates of mailed surveys, 1050 faculty were sent questionnaires. As a result, 314 faculty responded to the survey and this response rate was considered adequate on size but possibly contained the unavoidable risk of bias.

All faculty within schools of social work were randomly selected and were asked to participate in the study, namely, half of all MSW programs were selected randomly, and all faculty from each of these schools were surveyed. Lists of faculty who taught full-time in the selected schools were available through the World Wide Web pages of the Schools of Social Work.

CSWE demographic statistics revealed a similar pattern to the demographics of the overall sample, and 70 per cent of respondents in the survey identified themselves as white. This compares to 77 per cent of social work faculty as cited by CSWE. African Americans comprised 12 per cent of the sample, and 14 per cent in CSWE demographics. Of the sample received, 7.4 per cent identified themselves as Latino, compared with only 4 per cent of social work faculty

nation-wide identified as Latino. Since the study was concerned with Latino issues, it was predicted that they would be slightly over-represented in the sample. Asian Americans comprised the next largest group in the sample at 5.2 per cent, compared to 2.7 per cent in the CSWE sample. Moreover, 1.7 per cent of the respondents in this study identified themselves as Native American, while only one per cent was identified in the CSWE statistics.

Gender varied slightly more than race between the sample and CSWE statistics. In this study, 55 per cent respondents in the study were women, compared to 62 per cent in CSWE statistics. Therefore, 44 per cent of the sample were men, while 38 per cent of social work faculty that teach in masters programs are men.

Faculty rank also varied between the sample and CSWE statistics. However, since faculty rank was not shown to be a significant predictor of faculty perceptions with respect to the questions in this study, this is not seen as a major limitation on the study. Since non-tenure track faculty are often not listed on the web sites of schools of social work, and when identified as non-tenure track faculty on such web sites were not sent surveys, instructors are greatly underrepresented in the sample, but make up a substantial percentage of the overall population of social work faculty. CSWE statistics are calculated to exclude instructors or lecturers for the sake of comparison.

Associate professors were the largest group of respondents in the study, at 37 per cent of total respondents. Associate professors are the second largest group of social work faculty overall at 33 per cent, according to CSWE data. Full professors are the next largest group in the sample, consisting of 37 per cent of all the respondents, and 30 per cent of the recalculated CSWE demographics. Assistant professors were the smallest population in the sample at 27 per cent, but consisted of 37 per cent of the social work faculty overall, the largest of the CSWE ranking groups.

Overall, while there are differences between the sample and the general population of social work faculty, there seems to be enough congruence in key, significant areas to make some generalisation feasible.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was developed specifically for this study. Questions were related to demographic variables of the respondents as well as their attitudes concerning the curriculum of their respective schools of social work. The questionnaire constructed for this study utilised an ordinal scale of measurement. In addition to utilising a Likert scale, several open-ended questions were included to solicit opinions that would not have been anticipated during the data collection process. A pre-test was conducted with faculty from one school of social work not selected for the final sample, in order to help improve the clarity and validity of the study. Two questions were altered in response to feedback from these pre-study participants. Overall, the survey was found to have good face validity.

Data Collection

Surveys were mailed out in hand-addressed envelopes. The envelopes bore the name of the university and school with which the first author was affiliated at the time of the study. It was hoped that this approach would lead to a presentation that was personal, yet official. Also enclosed, attached to the questionnaire, was a printed return envelope.

Two weeks after the initial mailing, a follow-up packet was sent that included a cover letter, an additional informed consent letter, an additional survey, as well as an additional return envelope. The follow up cover letter was seen as crucial to increasing the response rate. It began:

If you have already sent in your questionnaire, thank you so much for participating in my study: *Culturally sensitive social work education for practice with Latinos*. If not, would you please read the letter on the following page, and consider participating in this study with important implications for social work education?

It was anticipated that by starting off with a statement of thanks, faculty who had not participated would be more positively inclined toward the research.

Two weeks after the second mailing, a final e-mail reminder was sent to 90 per cent of the sample. Approximately 10 per cent of the sample did not have e-mail addresses or an e-mail address that was not listed on their department's web site. Since this e-mail was a second reminder, and given the small percentage of potential respondents who did not receive e-mail reminders, this was not seen as a major methodological limitation to this study. The e-mail reminder was a simple letter that both thanked past participants as well as asked those who wanted to participate, but who had not yet done so, to send in their survey. An additional copy of the questionnaire was not included. However, recipients of the e-mail were informed that they could request an electronic copy if they so desired.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed through the use of SPSS, with both descriptive and inferential statistics utilised in the analysis.

Since a random and representative sample was procured, both parametric and nonparametric statistical procedures were appropriate for data analysis. The use of a randomly selected and sufficiently representative sample was specifically chosen as it allowed for great flexibility in choosing statistical procedures of data analysis (Weinbach and Grinnell, 1995).

FINDINGS

In this section, key findings are presented as they pertain to faculty perceptions of student preparedness. Charts are included of findings from the most central questions. Data in written form are presented on other data. Percentages recorded, as summarised in Table 1, are based on the total number of respondents, and therefore percentages do not add up to 100 per cent. The key question that is discussed in this report is the one that relates most directly to faculty perceptions of students' preparedness for culturally sensitive social work. The question states: "I believe that the MSW program is adequately preparing students for culturally sensitive practice". One hundred and forty-eight (47%) social work faculty agree that students graduating from their MSW program are prepared for culturally sensitive social work. Seventy-five respondents (24%) strongly agree with the statement. Fifty-five (18%) selected neutral as the most appropriate response. Twenty-three faculty (7%) disagreed with the statement. Only five (1.6%) strongly disagreed. The mean score is 2.13. The standard deviation is 0.93. Collapsing the data to provide further insight, nearly 70 per cent of social work faculty agreed that students graduating from their programs are prepared for culturally sensitive practice. Just fewer than 9 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. These results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students are prepared

	N	Per cent
Strongly agree	75	23.9
Agree	148	47.1
Neutral	55	17.5
Disagree	23	7.3
Strongly disagree	5	1.6

Another question asked if student were taught a framework for integrating culturally sensitive material. Over 70 per cent of social work faculty either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. 'Agree' continued to be the most frequently selected response, with 136 (43%) faculty making this selection. 'Strongly agree' followed, the choice of 91 (29%) faculty. More faculty selected 'neutral' (60 respondents or 19%) than in response to the previous two statements discussed. A small number of faculty either disagreed or strongly disagreed, with 16 (1.3%) and 4 (1.3%) respondents respectively. The response frequencies are summarised in Table 2. The mean score is 2.02, and the standard deviation is 0.90.

Table 2. Students are taught framework

	N	Per cent
Strongly agree	91	29.0
Agree	136	43.3
Neutral	60	19.5
Disagree	16	5.2
Strongly disagree	4	1.3

The next statement pertains to skills: "Students are taught skills of culturally sensitive social work practice". The same number and percentage of respondents chose to answer this question as the previous question. Similarly, 148 (47%) respondents agreed with the statement. 'Strongly agree' was the choice of 108 (34%) respondents. Again, over 80 per cent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Thirty-four (11%) respondents selected 'Neutral' for their response. Only 13 (4.1%) respondents disagreed, and 2 (0.6%) strongly disagreed. The mean score is 1.86. The standard deviation is 0.82 and the results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Skills of culturally sensitive practice

	N	Per cent
Strongly agree	108	34.4
Agree	148	47.1
Neutral	34	10.8
Disagree	13	4.1
Strongly disagree	2	0.6

Another statement sought to measure the degree to which social work faculty believed that social work students are taught theories of culturally sensitive practice. The statement reads: "Students are taught theories of culturally sensitive practice". Nearly half the respondents recorded 'Agree' with this statement, with 154 (49%) electing this answer. 'Strongly agree' was the second most frequent response, being selected by 107 (34%) respondents. Taken together, over 80 per cent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their MSW programs taught theories of culturally sensitive practice. Sixteen (5.1%) respondents disagreed, and six (1.9%) strongly disagreed. Twenty-four (7.6 per cent) respondents selected 'Neutral' for their answer. The results are presented in Table 4 and derive a mean score for this questions of 1.89 and a standard deviation of 0.90.

Table 4. Theories of culturally sensitive practice

	N	Per cent
Strongly agree	107	34.1
Agree	154	49.0
Neutral	24	7.6
Disagree	16	5.1
Strongly disagree	6	1.9

DISCUSSION

These various indicators tested the degree to which faculty believe their curricula are preparing students for culturally sensitive social work practice. The various indicators suggest that the majority of social work faculty teaching in MSW programs do believe that their programs are

preparing students for culturally sensitive social work practice in general. For each statement, over 70 per cent of faculty either agreed or strongly agreed.

It is interesting to note that faculty perceptions regarding what students are taught in the curriculum are stronger than faculty perceptions about students' actual preparedness. Nearly 10 per cent more faculty agreed or strongly agreed with questions regarding what is taught in regard to culturally sensitive practice compared to those who agreed or strongly agreed with students' actual preparedness. In other words, faculty perceived a discrepancy between what is taught and what students actually can do.

There are several possible reasons for this difference. First, in spite of faculty efforts, social work students, like most members of society, have preconceived ideas about ethnic minorities that are deeply entrenched. In spite of this material being covered in the curriculum, it is likely that some students would be resistant to some of this information. Such students may stand out, leaving lasting impressions in faculty members' minds regarding student preparedness. This may be particularly true in courses that focus on American racism, which challenge students on their internalised prejudiced beliefs. Second, while students might be receiving this information in class, this study did not assess the degree to which this information was reinforced in field practicum.

It also should be noted that such results are not uncommon with questionnaires that measure perceptions regarding a phenomena. A key limitation of this study is that it does not measure student preparedness directly. Subsequent studies that measure the relationship between key pedagogical variables and actual student practice behaviour would be extremely valuable.

CONCLUSION

This study presents data pertaining to faculty perceptions regarding student preparedness for culturally sensitive social work practice in the United States. As culturally sensitive practice becomes increasingly important to international higher education, studies that explore student preparedness will be in greater demand. Research in this area is particularly important, as institutions of higher education often invest considerable resources in promoting cultural sensitivity and diversity, yet few have outcome indicators related to their efforts. In times of increasingly tight budgets in higher education, it is essential that universities investigate the impact of their resource allocations.

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