

CULTURE AND COMPETENCE IN SOCIAL WORK

By

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Cultural competence has become a major goal of social work practice. But it is not entirely clear what it is; and, I believe, it is a concept in need of careful critical analysis.

In this lecture, I will discuss three quite different perspectives on the relationship between culture and competence.

- Postmodernism
- Cultural relativity
- Culturally competent practice

In the course of doing this I will also issue an alarm about several **dangers lurking on the edges of the concept of cultural competence.**

Postmodernism¹

Social work knowledge, whether it is understood as scientific and based on research or as a product of reflective experience, is decidedly a post-Enlightenment, “modern” phenomenon. It arises from a history of escaping from faith and pure speculation as the sources of knowledge and is built on the premise that the human mind is capable of using its powers of observation and reason to arrive at an understanding of various truths about the world in which we live.

Post-enlightenment culture is progressive in spirit. That is, it believes that knowledge and, for that matter, moral and political truths will unfold over time. Modernism is always about the quest for progress, the quest for new insights, new discoveries, new and improved ways of life, and new and improved social, economic, and political structures.

Post-enlightenment culture has been challenged by various points of view that are collectively referred to as “postmodernism.” These views are highly disparate but have in common skepticism, or even pessimism, about the possibility of empirical knowledge, particularly about human beings and human societies.

The postmodern view is that beliefs that pass for social knowledge are simply reflections of various modern cultural biases and/or of the

political power structure of the societies in which we live. We are trapped, presumably, by our very languages into perceiving the world in ways that reflect the ideologies and biases of the cultures in which we have been raised and socialized. And because we are trapped, postmodernism tells us, the methods we use as social workers to enhance human well-being inevitably perpetuate the inequities of the social structure.

Actually, it seems to me that there is another more optimistic dimension of post-modernism. Some post-modernists use a process of unpacking cultural assumptions called “deconstruction”,* which can help us to identify alternative ways of understanding and acting, alternative ways to structure our efforts to help people and the systems we create to provide help.

For example, the concept of mental illness is loaded with assumptions that lead to certain ways of understanding people’s suffering, certain ways of trying to help, certain ways of organizing personnel in a hierarchy, certain expectations about what should be paid for, etc.

Here’s an oversimplified example. If a person has a mental illness, it seems evident that she or he needs “treatment.” Treatment, of course, should be provided—or at least overseen—by a physician. Other types of personnel may have important roles to play; but if it’s treatment that is needed, it’s doctors who should be in charge. When it comes to funding treatment of mental illness, it generally seems evident to the people making policy that payments should be made for care that is medically necessary but not for care that is not. This results in great difficulty getting support for meeting the social needs of people with serious mental illness such as housing and vocational rehabilitation, which may be important to survival in the community, but which are not “medically necessary.”

As you can see, I hope, there is a logic of “mental illness”**, i.e., ways in which the concept of mental illness links seemingly self-evidently to certain interventions and to a structure of service delivery in which

* It is called “deconstruction” because postmodernism assumes the “social construction of reality.”

** Another example is “homelessness”, which is a concept that was purposely devised by a small group of people in the early 1980s who recognized that there were people living outdoors in dreadful conditions and wanted to find a way to talk about this problem that would win sympathy with the American public. They could have used other terms, such as “vagrancy”, “ex-convicts”, “the mentally ill”, “alcoholics and drug addicts” who sleep in “flophouses” or on the streets, but none of these ways of talking about these people would have aroused a sense of sympathy and societal responsibility. “Homeless” arouses compassion and a sense of a need that must be met. After all, no American should be without a home.

physicians are dominant. Is this what is best for people with mental illness? Maybe, but maybe not.

Doing this kind of deconstruction regarding our practices can, I think, lead us to think in innovative and productive ways about our work. This is quite valuable.

I think there is additional value to postmodern thought. Different cultures do bring different perspectives to bear on human life, and each of these perspectives reveals something about the world we live in. Selectively incorporating different perspectives into our work can help us be more effective, though I do want to emphasize that **we need to be selective. Not all cultural perspectives are sound.** (More on this later.)

In addition, I think it is important for us to understand, as the post-modernists emphasize, that concepts such as mental illness are shaped by human beings as ways of getting a handle on problems we must grapple with.

But the postmodern perspective, it seems to me, is ultimately too pessimistic about the possibility of knowledge. American philosophical pragmatists² beginning more than a century ago recognized the fact that concepts are structured by human beings in particular cultures to serve particular purposes and that they are not true in the Platonic sense of literal correspondence to a reality separate from human experience. The pragmatists reached the conclusion that we should, therefore, judge concepts on the basis of their usefulness.

Social work, I believe, should draw from the tradition of American pragmatism, seeking knowledge that works and taking action based on the best available information.

Cultural Relativity³

Another cast of mind that has emerged with the discovery of the vast variety of cultures is what is referred to as "cultural relativity." Roughly speaking this is the view that all cultures have their own set of values and that, since all values are derived from human cultures rather than from divine authority, each culture's values are as good as every other culture's.

There is no doubt in my mind that we have much to learn from other cultures and that there are broad areas of moral, metaphysical, and religious belief in which we should not interfere.

But let's think about this for a minute. At one time in human history, everyone believed that the Earth is flat. For all I know there are still cultures that believe that. If so, they are just wrong. It doesn't matter that for most of human history, people from many cultures and around the world thought that the Earth is flat. That belief is untrue.

There are, of course, many truths of this kind, truths that are entirely independent of cultural constructs. And I don't know anyone who argues that truths of this kind are merely "socially constructed".

But it is quite common for people to argue that values are socially constructed and are matters of cultural taste.

I recently learned, for example, that in some African cultures, fathers don't bear responsibility for their children. Uncles—the brothers of the woman whose children they are—bear the kind of responsibilities that we call "paternal."

Here we might reasonably say that there's no right or wrong way of raising children, that it is culturally relative and ok either way.

But does this apply to values across the board?

Do you believe that the values of the Nazi culture, which resulted in the slaughter of 12 million people in concentration camps, are as good as the values of democratic societies? Do you believe that it is just fine that in some Muslim areas, women are still punished for having sex outside of marriage by being buried up to their necks in sand and stoned to death? Do you believe that all the values of the dominant American culture are just fine the way they are, that it's OK, for example, that significant numbers of people of color still experience discrimination or that large numbers of poor people are unable to get access to the same opportunities as wealthy people?

Pick any social or global problem. Isn't the change you want in fact a change in culture?

If you are a dyed-in-the-wool cultural relativist, you cannot logically wish for social and political change because that would mean asserting that your values are better than the values of the culture you wish to change.

Uncritical cultural relativity, that is to say, produces a profoundly conservative tendency to accept some forms of human suffering and social injustice as a matter of cultural fate.

But how can we know that a culture's values are not good values? In *What Really Matters*,⁴ Arthur Kleinman suggests that there are two stances from which to make value judgments—(1) the local stance, which is simply the view of any particular society or culture, and (2) the view one gets from observing a local society.

Kleinman maintains that, from the outside, we can make judgments about local values, by attending to the impact of these values on the success of a society.

Kleinman talks, for example, about a quintessential Englishman—proud, nationalistic, brave, able to follow or give orders, etc. Up close these seem to be great qualities, but from a distance one sees—Kleinman tells us—that they are the qualities that led Great Britain into WWI and the death of millions of people for no good reason.

This outcome, according to Kleinman, is a reason to reject English values of heroism of a certain kind.

Outcomes, of course, are just one source of judgment from outside a culture. Another is human rights, which many believe to be universal.⁵ As I noted earlier, racism may be customary but it is a clear violation of human rights.

Cultural Competence⁶

What's troubling about this rejection of cultural relativity is that the field of social work properly calls on all of us to be culturally competent⁷, and this entails having a high tolerance of difference as well as a deep understanding and respect of the values and goals of people of different cultures.

Tolerance of, and respect for, cultural differences is a critical dimension of the concept of "cultural competence", which over the past two decades or so has become a major goal of social work education and practice.

At its most basic, the idea of cultural competence is simple and obvious. We live in a multicultural society, and much of our work is with people who are not White and middle class. To work effectively with people from different cultures, we need to understand their cultures.

The concept of cultural competence is also a critical corrective to a history of social work that was dominated early on by moralistic and judgmental views of our clients rather than by understanding and respect.

It is also a critical corrective to the history of the dominance of psychodynamic and developmental theories that assume that human problems reflect inner conflict and that human beings from various cultures follow virtually universal patterns of development.

And the concept of cultural competence is a critical corrective of the assumption that Euro-American approaches to help, which draw heavily on a medical model, are meaningful and applicable to people from other cultures, who may in fact find some of our interventions (such as psychotherapy) more than a little strange.^{8,9}

Because I believe that we have to understand the world in which our clients live in order to work with them effectively and because I believe that the above corrections to historical traditions in social work are critical, I believe that cultural competence is a very important dimension of social work practice, and I support its emergence as a core requirement of social work education.

But I think it needs to be carefully defined and carefully distinguished from the kind of unreflective cultural relativity that I just discussed and from simplistic claims that are sometimes made in the name of cultural competence—particularly claims that diminish the fact and importance of individuality, those that overstate the difference between “individualistic” and “collectivist” cultures, and those that ignore universal dimensions of human life.

What is cultural competence?

First, a little bit of history.

When I became a social worker, cultural competence was not a central concept in our field. The concept of civil rights was. Our concerns were focused on racism and discrimination in the United States. We believed that it was important to open opportunities to Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. We also were concerned about women’s rights. Concerns about the rights of people with disabilities and non-heterosexuals were later developments.

Our goals in social work were to provide equal access to services of equal quality to “minorities”, to integrate service settings racially, to educate minorities to become professionals, to provide jobs and promotional opportunities for them, and to bring minorities into the power structure of our profession and our society.

For example, in the early 1980's there was a "Minority Advisory Committee" in the New York State Office of Mental Health. In the late 80's it became the "Multi-Cultural Advisory Committee."

A major shift had taken place from a focus on rectifying the inequalities of the past to a focus on supporting a multicultural society and providing competent services for people of all cultures.

I confess that I miss the focus on civil rights in social work. It was part of a great social movement, and its goals were clear. Hiring people of color as a matter of justice is, I think, much easier to understand than hiring people because they are "bi-cultural," particularly when the people we hire as bi-cultural frequently come from a different culture within a minority group than the people they are serving.

Nevertheless, I support the push for cultural competence understood as:

- Skill in engagement of, and interaction with, clients from diverse cultures;
- The ability to discern cultural differences in attitudes, acceptable behavior, values, and goals and to apply this knowledge to assessment and diagnosis;
- The ability to adapt one's practices to the perceptions and values of other cultures; and
- The development of health and human service systems that do justice to people from minority cultures.

The skills of cultural competence, you will be taught, rest on

- Understanding one's own biases and rooting them out,
- Understanding and developing respect for the worldview and traditional practices of cultures that are foreign to you; and
- Adapting traditional social work practices so as to engage people of different cultures, to assess their strengths and needs, and to provide helpful interventions.

What is less likely to be taught in your practice classes is what a culturally competent system is. I find it useful to think in terms of six key characteristics.

1. Outreach to cultural minorities and educating them about how to get help
2. Recognition of the importance of language and bicultural experience
3. Recruitment of staff from diverse cultures.

4. Training in the subtleties of engagement, diagnosis, assessment, and treatment of people from cultural minorities.
5. Participation of cultural minorities in the power structure of the system via promotion of minority staff to supervisory and management positions and inclusion of members of the populations served on boards of directors, in regulatory agencies, etc.
6. And finally, the provision of processes through which intercultural, particularly interracial, tensions and conflicts can be ameliorated if not eliminated.

As you can see, my conception of a culturally competent system weaves together the perspective of competence in engagement, assessment, and intervention with the central goals of the civil rights movement.

Cultural Competence and Cultural Relativity

So why do I have concerns about the possible confusion of cultural competence and cultural relativity?

Consider this example. In 2004 the journal *Social Work* published an article by David Hodge on working with Indians who are Hindus.¹⁰ It presented the article as a good example of cultural competence.

The article offered, I thought, a fairly good picture of the ordinary Hindu family, but in pointing out that women are generally subservient homemakers in Indian families, it implied that this is something that a social worker not only needs to understand but also to accept.

There are several problems with this.

First, in fact, there are many Hindu women who do not accept roles as subservient homemakers. They work. They insist on equality. And they believe that Indian women should become more self-sufficient and independent. For example, when I was in India, I visited a program that is devoted to teaching women to read and to be tailors so that they have the opportunity to escape from men who, they told me, are often exploitative if not downright abusive. The people who run this program include good Hindus, who simply do not accept the traditional role of women. There are many such Indian women—and men. (Check out almost any recent Bollywood movie to get a sense of the transition going on in Indian culture.)

The second problem with the view that a culturally competent social worker should accept the prevailing social structure is that acceptance of some of the customs in India has dreadful consequences for some Indian women. For example, dowry death—the murder of women after

they marry and have paid their dowries—still takes place in India. And, although it is against the law, it is often overlooked in fact. Surely, we should not accept this custom in the name of cultural competence.

The third problem is that it is not clear that cultural competence means acceptance of such social inequities as women playing a subservient role. That it is traditional doesn't make it right.

And cultures change. Some of what is traditional now will not be traditional later, and these changes take place in part because individuals and subgroups within cultures refuse to live in the old ways and work to bring about social changes.

Two final notes about multi-culturalism and cultural competence: (1) cultures blend when people from different cultures are exposed to each other and (2) individuals often resist and escape the expectations and ways that their cultures set for them. (See, for example, Amartya Sen's book called *Identity and Violence*.¹¹)

There is a conservative danger lurking in the concept of cultural competence. We are told not only to understand but also to respect cultural traditions. But some of these traditions involve the subservience of women, the exploitation of very poor people, or the *de facto*, if not *de jure*, political disempowerment of people in the lower classes—to mention just a few of the political downsides of tradition.

Never forget that slavery was a tradition in the United States and was defended as a key element of the Southern culture. Never forget that virulent anti-Semitism is a traditional part of some cultures.

Before I am misunderstood, I want to repeat that I support the push for cultural competence but that cultural competence should not be confused with cultural relativity, which is a profoundly conservative stance because it accepts all social practices and traditions as as good as all other practices and traditions and thus provides no grounds for seeking social change.

Cultural competence should not mean uncritical acceptance of all cultural perspectives and traditions. As Belisa Lozano-Vranich and Jorge Petit say in *The Seven Beliefs: A Step-By-Step Guide To Help Latinas Recognize and Overcome Depression*¹², "...while most established beliefs can be a great source of comfort and empowerment, **some** beliefs and traditions, even those we all hold dear, may be harmful to your health, your psyche, your spirit. It is at this point that your beliefs cry out to be examined and discussed, and shared; you owe it to yourselves, to your children, your family, to your very future to understand that some

beliefs may need to be altered or discarded altogether if you are to be happier and healthier.”

I want to mention three other dangers lurking at the edges of cultural competence—stereotyping, lumping very different cultures together, and failure to recognize cross-cultural dimensions of human life.

Stereotyping: The Hodge article illustrates the problem of stereotyping quite well. As I pointed it, while it may be true that women in Hindu families often play subservient roles, it is certainly not always the case.

Over the years, I have attended many programs about cultural differences. Some of the presenters were funny enough for comedy clubs. But the humor, of course, was all based on stereotyping, as much of our humor is.

How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb? None, she'd rather sit in the dark? How many WASPs does it take to change a light bulb? Two, one to change the bulb and one to mix the martinis?

Of course, there are cultural differences, and familiarity with them can help us listen for the culture of the people we serve. But we also need to listen for their individuality.

Lumping populations: In real life discussions of cultural competence, it is commonplace to lump populations under the rubrics “African-American,” “Hispanic,” and “Asian-American”.

Think about it. We call people African-Americans who are the descendants of slaves in the American South, who have come to the United States recently from the West Indies, and who are recent immigrants from Africa. The cultures of these groups are quite different.

Similarly, we call people Hispanic who come from Spain, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Mexico, Central America, and South America—including Brazil, where the language is Portuguese. Very different cultures.

We call people Asian-American who come from India, Pakistan, Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, etc. Not only are there marked differences in language and culture but some of these nations have long histories of enmity.

Lumping these populations together may be useful for political purposes, for purposes of helping minorities gain some power in our

society. But it is not very useful from the standpoint of achieving cultural competence through the use of bi-cultural staff.

Our Common Humanity: Finally, I think it is as important to recognize our common humanity as to understand and respect our cultural differences.

For example, at the opening of a text on cultural competence widely used here at Columbia,¹³ the authors tell the story of a social work class taught by a middle-aged, white, male social worker who is thoroughly steeped in psychodynamic developmental theory.

A young, Hispanic, female presents a case in which a Hispanic woman in her early 30s wants to marry a man of whom her father does not approve. She is torn between her love and desire to marry this man and her loyalty to her father and family.

The teacher—who is quite apparently a very poor social worker—says that the student should help this woman to master the developmental stage of individuation so that she will not be trapped by her immature ties to her father and her family.

The student—wiser in life than the teacher—points out that the ties in Hispanic families are very strong and that it is not a symptom of immaturity to be torn between love and family.

The authors comment that the teacher apparently doesn't understand that the Hispanic culture is collectivistic and family oriented while the American culture is individualistic and that therefore he doesn't understand that the dilemma is not pathological but a normal tension in Hispanic culture.

Now, I don't doubt that family loyalty has some special features among Hispanics, but I must tell you that this old, white Jew recognizes the conflict between love and family loyalty as commonplace in the Jewish culture, where parents often make great demands about whom their children should marry. And I would bet that most of you recognize it is commonplace in your cultures.

(Of course, there are cultures where love is not a major consideration in marriage, and only a fool of a social worker would fail to understand that arranged marriages seem perfectly reasonable and work quite well for many people. But it would take an equal fool of a social worker to believe that all Indians accept the tradition of arranged marriage.)

I also have some skepticism about the distinction frequently drawn between collectivistic, family-oriented cultures and individualistic cultures. African, Asian, and Hispanic cultures are often cited as collectivistic and family-oriented in contrast to the American and European cultures, which are identified as individualistic.

In my experience, most Americans are family oriented and feel powerful obligations to their families. And in my experience, there are ambitious individuals striving for individual success who are African, Asian, and Hispanic.

Family, it seems to me, is at the heart of being human; and that is a cross-cultural fact.

As for the apparent distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures, I suspect it has much more to do with the distinction between small, simple communities and large, complex high-tech societies than it does with individualism and collectivism. Frankly, I prefer life in complex societies precisely because it gives me room to be who I want to be, while small communities frequently are culturally coercive.

Conclusion:

Throughout your education here at Columbia School of Social Work, you will be encouraged, indeed required, to become culturally competent. That expectation arises from awareness that we live in a pluralistic society and that effective, humane pluralistic societies have a high tolerance for cultural diversity. I am a strong advocate for pluralistic societies with diverse values, which I personally prefer to small, communities with mostly shared values. And I believe that to be effective as a social worker in a pluralistic society, you must be open to cultural diversity and, in that sense, you must be culturally competent. But be careful. There are, as I hope I have made clear, dangers to uncritical acceptance of the concept of cultural competence.

¹ Aylesworth, G. (2005). "[Postmodernism](#)" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

² Legg, C. (2008). "[Pragmatism](#)" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

³ Carnegie Council. [Cultural Relativism](#).

⁴ Kleinman, Arthur (2007). [What Really Matters: Living A Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger](#). Oxford University Press.

⁵ United Nations (1948). [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

⁶ Raheim, Salome (2002) "Cultural Competence: A Requirement for Empowerment Practice," Chapter 6 in *Pathways to Power: Readings In Contextual Social Work*

Practice, edited by Michael O'Melia and Karla Krogsrud Miley. Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 2002.

⁷ NASW. "[Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice.](#)"

⁸ Fadiman, Ann. (2002). Chs. 3 & 4 in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*.

⁹ Rogler, Lloyd and Cortes, Dharma (1993). "[Help-Seeking Pathways: A Unifying Concept in Mental Health Care.](#)" *American Journal of Psychiatry*, April 1993.

¹⁰ Hodge, David (2004), "[Working with Hindu Clients](#) In A Spiritually Sensitive Manner" in *Social Work*, January 2004

¹¹ Sen, A. (2007). *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. Norton Paperback.

¹² Lozano-Vranich, B. and Petit, J (2003). *The Seven Beliefs: A Step-By-Step Guide To Help Latinas Recognize and Overcome Depression*, Harper Collins.

¹³ Sue, DW and Sue, D (Various editions). *Counseling The Culturally Diverse*.