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Culturally Grounded Methods of Social Work Practice

PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK IS A WESTERN INVENTION, BUT OFTEN IT IS taught as if its methods of interventions are culturally neutral. Because of this oversight, not only do practitioners run the risk of implementing interventions that are ineffective due to a lack of cultural fit between the intervention and the targeted population, but they also miss opportunities to incorporate culturally grounded ways of helping. For example, agencies and providers often target language as a key aspect of cultural diversity. A child welfare agency may develop policies to place foster children in families by matching the primary language spoken by the child while deemphasizing assessments of other relevant cultural factors. Although the agency workers are following an important component of a culturally grounded approach, reliance on language-matching addresses just one dimension of a successful culturally grounded intervention. When the desired results are not attained, there is a tendency to blame the client rather than to assess the cultural relevance of the service delivery system. The assimilationist model perpetuates the myth that if clients were just a little more like the white middle class, everything would be fine. Social workers must remember that the ultimate goal of any social work intervention is to serve, not to colonize (Aponte, 1994). Workers who are culturally unaware can easily become instruments of assimilation, misinterpreting difference as deviance or as a deficiency, and failing to recognize the strengths coming from culture that keep individuals and their families healthy.

Since the inception of the profession of social work in nineteenth-century England, most social work practice and research have focused on one-on-one interventions. Such models may feel natural and comfortable to many white middle-class clients and clients from other backgrounds who are acculturated or assimilated to mainstream culture. However, this individualistic approach may feel foreign or uncomfortable to others. In addition, definitions of well-being and happiness may vary between communities, and the means and approaches to intervene in times of crisis may vary as well.

Although the profession is now practiced globally and with clients from different cultural backgrounds, the cultural relevance of this traditional intervention

is limited. One-on-one interventions present challenges because the social worker often has more power than the client does. As a result, the worker may unconsciously place her- or himself at the cultural center of the relationship, forcing the client to adjust to the cultural framework and the resulting boundaries imposed by the worker. Practitioners can greatly influence their clients' lives, and practitioners' actions in one-on-one interventions can affect their clients for better or for worse. Unlike family interventions, group work, and community interventions, which are naturally conducive to horizontal relationships and client participation and empowerment, one-on-one interventions require a conscious effort to place clients and their culture at the center of the worker-consumer relationship. Thus, when practitioners engage in one-on-one interventions with clients, it is important that culture play a central role in the design and choice of the intervention. The client's culture must be approached as a possible source of strength, and the worker must take into account and incorporate the cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices of the client from the beginning, at the intake and assessment points.

So-called culturally neutral services and methods tend to disregard the unique contributions and needs of different ethnic communities. These interventions often enforce the dominant narrative and reflect a view of the world that does not recognize or celebrate the client's cultural heritage. When working with clients from different cultural backgrounds, social workers need to ask themselves not only what the right type of intervention is for the presenting problem but also what the right type of intervention is for the client. If a one-on-one intervention is the answer to both questions, practitioners who are working with members of strongly collectivistic communities must find ways to integrate this type of intervention with a more collectivistic way of helping through group or family interventions. Change does not occur in isolation; new behaviors need to be rehearsed in social contexts as similar as possible to the daily life of the client.

CULTURALLY GROUNDED SOCIAL WORK WITH INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR FAMILIES

One way of implementing the culturally grounded approach in many agency settings is through family interventions. These interventions tend to pay close attention to the practitioner's impact on family members, and vice versa, focusing not only on the needs of individuals but taking into account the whole family system. Family interventions emphasize connections between individuals and view interactions systematically and structurally, but they seldom see families as networks that extend beyond the nuclear family. Different ethnic and identity groups may view their extended family networks in ways that need close exploration and understanding. For example, traditional Chinese identity is heavily

influenced by relatives, and any attempt to empower an individual of Chinese background needs to involve or at least acknowledge all of the client's family members. Because interpersonal family relationships and harmony are very important in Chinese culture, social workers can best achieve the empowerment of clients as individuals by advocating for their rights and responsibilities in the context of their family roles and social statuses. The following set of principles can guide a culturally grounded approach to working with families.

1. Practitioners and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.
2. Family members are a vital resource.
3. Practitioners enhance families and their capacity to support the growth and development of all family members: adults of all ages, youths, and children.
4. Interventions affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society.
5. Practitioners are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.
6. Practitioners work with families to advocate services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.
7. Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.
8. Interventions are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
9. Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration. (Jepson, Thomas, Markward, Kelly, Koser, & Diehl, 1997).

Recognizing the key role of family is just the first step. The next step involves the recognition that families live in densely interconnected social networks. They are part of a neighborhood, a house of worship, a tribe, a clan, and/or an identity community such as the gay, transgender, or deaf community. The connection to other institutions or informal networks is a key element to consider during the assessment and action plan phases. Ignoring these connections may lead to misinterpretations and mistaken assessments. Note from the field 11.1 illustrates the strong connections between culture, mental health, spirituality, and religion, and how these links can affect assessment and family interventions. In this example, the social work intern effectively integrated the belief systems and spiritual dimensions of the presenting problem, which resulted in an appropriate course of action for the family. She might have chosen a behavioral approach instead, one that encouraged the client to replace her disturbing thoughts about her niece's

NOTE FROM THE FIELD 11.1**Let Her Soul Rest in Peace**

Leticia is a bilingual (Spanish/English) advanced practice MSW intern at an elementary school situated on the outskirts of a large city in the Southwest. For several weeks, she has been working with a Mexican family who recently immigrated to the United States. In supervision, Leticia expresses concerns about her perceived lack of progress with the Rodriguez family. The two children continue to present symptoms of depression and anxiety. Their symptoms are very similar to those shown by their mother after a niece who lived with them committed suicide six months earlier. Mother and children have recurring dreams about the dead young woman. Leticia has been encouraged by her field supervisor to address this issue directly with the mother. At their next meeting, after a few minutes, the mother shares her concern that the lack of a proper burial prevents her niece from resting in peace and moving on to the other world. No funeral mass or blessing of any kind took place because, given her understanding of the Roman Catholic Church's stance on suicide, she believed that no priest would perform the ceremony. Leticia is encouraged by her supervisor to double-check this assumption with the local parish priest. The priest offers to visit the family, and together they agree to have a mass of remembrance and prayer for the deceased niece. The ritual provides closure, and the whole family is able to move on with their grieving process. Soon after, the family's depressive symptoms begin to dissipate.

suicide with happier memories of her. Such an approach would have been premature, as it neither identified nor addressed the crux of the family's dilemma. The acknowledgement of key cultural dimensions of family life (unresolved grief) and their connection to other key social systems (church) resulted in positive change.

Families, which are formed by individuals in committed relationships that may not involve biological ties, are one of the strongest institutions in the United States as well as the rest of the globe. However, American society is characterized by a high rate of divorce, out-of-marriage births, and little contact between members of divorced families. Not only does the United States have one of the highest rates of divorce in the world, with about half of all first marriages ending in divorce, but it also has a high rate of remarriage. Over three-fourths of those who divorce eventually remarry. As a result, about one child in five under the age of eighteen is a stepchild (Mechoulan, 2006). Nonetheless, despite dramatic changes in family structures over the last few decades, mainstream American culture tends

to attach negative definitions to any form of family that does not conform to the traditional family structure of breadwinner father, homemaker mother, and their biological children.

Such dated beliefs about family are sometimes reflected in U.S. family policies, such as prohibitions and limitations on adoptions of children by gay couples and unmarried individuals. How families are formed is sometimes seen as more important than how well they perform essential functions for their members. Various efforts have aimed at regulating how families form without considering the needs of children first.

Families' different cultural backgrounds provide different cultural environments in which children become socialized. As part of that socialization process, children develop a worldview and a culture and learn how to interact with an outside environment that makes them aware of their race and ethnicity, often through the lens of racism, ethnocentrism, and acculturation. It is within this context that social workers best enact their roles as advocates and cultural mediators.

CULTURALLY GROUNDED SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

Members of oppressed and disadvantaged communities face a host of barriers in their quest to advance socially, economically, and spiritually. Some of these difficulties emerge from misunderstandings concerning their cultural status, racial inequality, lack of support systems, and stereotypical media portrayals. These and other factors reinforce a master narrative of who these groups are, why they experience life as they do, and what change is possible for them. By employing a mutual aid approach, group work provides an effective counterforce to the devaluation of cultural identities that occurs when cultural minorities are cast as the "other." In groups, individuals can deconstruct and challenge stereotypical messages from the majority culture and can become aware of their own internalized oppression. The group helps them normalize their feelings and perceptions. Culturally grounded social work with groups connects individuals with their cultural roots and then explores what the group members have in common in terms of the past, the present, and their dreams for the future. This approach maximizes the potential of the members' narrative legacies and allows their commonalities to emerge. This culturally grounded process follows the identity development approach by helping group members to become aware of their identity in the context of their cultural background and its connection to their experience of oppression. Resources from the culture can be used creatively and respectfully to support this process as group members gain or regain awareness of their norms, values, and traditions. Group members from ethnic minority communities can share and sup-

port each other in their own challenges as they navigate between the two worlds represented by minority and majority communities.

Social workers of different identity backgrounds are often challenged to become familiar with the unique cultures that group members represent and the issues their communities are facing. Such knowledge is crucial for the effective facilitation of group activities. Regardless of their background, social workers can educate themselves about a community's historical traditions, cultural beliefs, and norms, and they can learn how to integrate appropriate styles of communication respectfully. They can also work to comprehend the magnitude and implications of the loss of culture and be conscious of the members' level of assimilation into the dominant culture.

Most social work with groups takes place within agency settings, and agencies customarily adopt a traditional "culturally neutral" approach to group facilitation. Group members are generally expected to absorb new knowledge, store it, and use it when needed. Freire (1994) described pedagogy of this type as "the banking approach to teaching," in which it is assumed that the teacher (worker) possesses something the student (client) needs but lacks. This approach is problematic because it pays no attention to the differences between the worker and the group members, relies on and reinforces client passivity, and disregards the complex contextual factors that contribute to the formation of the client's attitudes and behaviors.

Workers and clients perceive and evaluate their worlds differently. Developmental life experiences—as well as gender, sexual orientation, ability status, social class, and ethnicity—all shape an individual's worldview. When there are substantial differences in developmental factors and experiences, there are even greater gaps between what workers and clients perceive as valuable knowledge. Culturally grounded group work attempts to remedy this situation by rescuing and validating community-based narratives.

Clients who find their culture reflected in the substance and format of group interventions are more likely to be motivated to participate and to benefit from the experience. Group interventions that are grounded in the culture of the targeted population reflect and recognize norms of behavior and other cultural products of the group. Therefore, culturally grounded group work uses culture to inspire group members. The objective is to highlight the resiliency factors that are present in the evolving cultural narratives that emerge from the group members' communities.

One way to ground work in the culture of the group members is to utilize practices from ethnographic interviewing (see chapter 14). To develop empathy among all members of a therapeutic group, group sessions can begin with an ethnographic interview, during which group members are invited to identify important parts of their culture (Corey, 1992). The interview may include questions on how individuals think their culture will influence their participation in the

group or what things each individual may see differently from the rest of the group because of a unique cultural background. If a taboo topic is identified by a group member, the group facilitator can help the group address the topic and develop a culturally appropriate strategy to know when avoidance of a topic is resistance, and when it is being avoided because the subject is taboo.

Group composition plays an important role in group outcomes. For example, the gender composition of the group has salient implications for group functioning (Martin & Shanahan, 1983). Therefore, it is possible for gender to operate like any other status characteristic during group work. If the practitioner or the other group members bring rigid expectations about appropriate male and female behavior to the group, those expectations may actually affect behaviors and perceptions. Note from the field 11.2 describes a case study where a group with a homogenous gender and cultural composition was used to address the needs of a specific

NOTE FROM THE FIELD 11.2

Missing School

Manuel Benitez is a school social worker assigned to the bilingual and multicultural program of a large urban midwestern school district. One of his roles is to monitor the academic achievement of students enrolled in the program who speak different languages. In a quarterly report to his supervisor, he notes an alarming trend among Arabic-speaking female middle school students. Their academic achievement continues to be very high, but they also have very high levels of absenteeism. Manuel interviews the Arabic-speaking teaching aides and learns that most of these girls are Palestinian and they are missing school so that they can visit their families' villages and refugee camps in preparation for prearranged marriages. He suggests the formation of an Arabic girls' group as a means to explore the situation and look for possible alternatives. Because he is male and does not speak Arabic, his first reaction was not to get involved and to find an Arabic-speaking female social worker to facilitate the group. His supervisor did not agree and encouraged Manuel to co-facilitate the group. He recruited an Arabic-speaking female social worker to co-facilitate the group with him. The two of them went together to all of the families' homes and explained the purpose of the group and asked them to sign permission slips allowing their daughters to attend the group. All except one of the mothers agreed to allow their daughters to participate in the group. The group members spoke mostly in Arabic and the co-facilitator summarized the exchanges for Manuel. How can the group leaders facilitate the group without alienating the group members from their families and culture?

cultural group. The homogeneous group composition in this example provided a safe environment where the young Arabic women were able to discuss the situation without being afraid of being judged by others.

Culture must be integrated from the pre-group phase to the formation and termination phases. Different cultures deal with conflict in different ways, and some individuals may not have a great need to express themselves verbally. Thus, culturally grounded group work takes into account not only the content of the group sessions, but the process itself, such that the “how” is as important as the “what.”

CULTURALLY GROUNDED SOCIAL WORK WITH COMMUNITIES

Oppressed ethnic communities in the United States often are located in the bottom strata of income and wealth. Sometimes racism and discrimination become additional barriers to community development, and social workers may need to understand that in these ethnic communities, people often find themselves in powerless positions. Social work in such communities is rooted in the settlement house movement, during which social workers not only provided services to the community but also worked to empower marginalized groups. They organized communities, improved services, and administrated health programs. Although settlement houses still exist today (often in the form of community centers), they are under threat (Fabricant & Fisher, 2002b), and social work with communities in general is jeopardized by government downsizing and the abdication of responsibility to meet human needs. As a result, the importance of advocacy and client mobilization has increased. When working with communities, social workers need to remember that they “do not hold the answers to problems, but that in the context of collaboration, community members will develop the insights, skills, and capacity to resolve their own situations” (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1998, p. 8). Social workers build capacity for change by recognizing that members of the community live in oppressive circumstances that inhibit their ability to act effectively. When people begin to exercise control over the direction of their lives and have opportunities to join together to set priorities for their communities, their capacity for meeting personal and community goals is enhanced. The role of the community-building practitioner is to facilitate and strengthen the development of social networks as the means to support the development of strong communities that are able to exercise change and improve their living conditions (Fabricant & Fisher, 2002a).

It has been argued that community organizing has lost its purpose and relevance in post-industrial societies. Social and economic transformations produced by neoliberal policies ended the democratic/redistributive phase of community development and resulted in new forms of purposive social action aimed at

achieving social justice (Newman, 2006). These new types of community organizing efforts tend to be at the grassroots level and are playing a significant role in the creation of a more just society for the most oppressed and vulnerable sectors of society (Fisher & Kling, 1994). Many contemporary community-based social movements are being organized by ethnic minority groups, women, youth groups, and other sectors of society that were not well represented in the old social movements that flourished between World War II and the 1970s. These new movements tend to be identity based (e.g., based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation). These community efforts toward change and transformation originate in a collective identity, or shared sense of self, and the organizing efforts that are inspired by this collective identity, which in turn reinforce the group's sense of identity. In this way, individuals achieve a collective sense that their shared identity is a source of oppression and at the same time can become a source of power through organizing (Duyvendak & Nederland, 2007).

The challenge for social workers who are practicing from a culturally grounded perspective is to bring together diverse grassroots efforts inspired by collective identities that share a geographic space and have similar social and political goals to form coalitions that can create lasting social change. Coalitions could help identity-centered efforts aim at lasting structural and policy changes beyond their own more limited change agendas.

FORMING COALITIONS WITHIN DIFFERENT ETHNO-CULTURAL COMMUNITIES

In recent years, given the increasing intensity and frequency of interethnic conflicts around the world, numerous forces have demonstrated the need for multiethnic coalitions. The Los Angeles riots in 1992 revived and refocused research on interethnic conflicts in the United States because they revealed the complexity of relationships between different ethnic groups. Political conflict between African American and Latino communities can reflect competition for scarce resources between these ethnic groups, overlaid by conflict between immigrant and resident populations. Nationalistic interests and the interests of different ethnic groups also contribute to inter- and intra-racial and ethnic group tensions. Many grassroots efforts are concerned about the lack of recognition of common interests across communities and a rise in competition among groups on issues like jobs, education, housing, health care, crime control, and the role of government. At the same time, there has been a decline in the role played by mediating institutions like religious organizations, unions, and political parties in addressing these community issues.

The creation of cross-cultural alliances and coalitions may very well be an important step in decreasing the level of cultural and ideological fragmentation

that characterizes many urban centers around the globe. When members of communities focus exclusively on their cultural differences, the resulting fragmentation tends to obscure the problems that they have in common, such as power differentials, privilege, access to resources and services, and wealth. Coalitions are a way of organizing across group lines to address these inequalities. While differences in multiethnic and racial communities are important, coalitions can provide a mechanism to take action around common interests on issues such as employment, income, housing, and medical care. Whereas at the macro level, these differences may be very difficult to reconcile, short-term and issue-oriented multiethnic coalitions that develop at the neighborhood level may be able to surmount these differences around more specific issues. One strategy available to less powerful ethnic groups is the formation of partnerships with more established groups. Such coalitions are necessary to enhance the chances that less influential groups will be incorporated in a dominant local coalition.

As coalitions addressing a variety of social and health problems become more common, research has begun to identify the factors associated with effective coalitions. Butterfoss, Goodman, and Wandersman (1996) found the effectiveness of the coalition's leadership, staff-committee relations, organizational climate, the coalition members' influence on decision making, and community linkages to be associated with member participation and satisfaction. Interestingly, these factors did not directly influence the quality of the coalitions' plans or the primary outcomes of coalition activities. A case study of two health promotion coalitions found that their effectiveness was related to a number of diverse factors. Most important were a grassroots rather than bureaucratic source of vision; more staff time devoted to coalition organizing activities than to the daily maintenance of the organization; a backstage role for staff in carrying out coalition activities, which allows coalition leaders to have a more visible role; frequent and productive communication among staff and members; high levels of cohesiveness; a more complex coalition structure during the intervention phase; and intensive and on-going training and technical assistance (Kumpfer, Turner, Hopkins, & Librett, 1993).

The theoretical and empirical literature on multiethnic coalition building is limited; however, many explanations for why people form coalitions point to the self-interest of individuals and groups and the realization that cooperation can maximize their benefits. Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) presented four requirements for successful multiethnic coalitions: (1) recognition of the interests of each party, (2) a shared belief that each party in the coalition stands to benefit, (3) acceptance that each party has its own base of power and decision making, and (4) agreement that the coalition must deal with specific and identifiable goals and issues. Shared views and ideologies may also be a prerequisite for the development of effective alliances based on a set of common interests.

Before functional coalitions can be developed, divisive issues like nationalism

and identity politics may need to be addressed. Multicultural change is a process that recognizes the difference between groups while increasing interaction and cooperation between them, and recognizing differences and building bridges at the community level. Issues that may compromise or limit the effectiveness of a coalition include nationalistic ideologies, intense ethnic solidarity, and cultural and class differences that create barriers between its members. In addition, differences in group size, economic status, and resources can interfere with the coalition-building process.

In sum, a shared minority status does not automatically facilitate the formation of social and political coalitions. Members of ethno-cultural minority communities form coalitions as they recognize their differences and honor their intergroup heterogeneity. Ideally, on the long list of issues that different groups bring to the table, a shared set of concerns can be identified. It is around the short list of shared issues or grievances that the social worker supports the formation of community coalitions and facilitates the identification of the shared power the coalition members have.

FOSTERING CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN AGENCIES AND AMONG STAFF

It is important for agencies to make an effort to become culturally competent and to be welcoming to different ethno-racial communities. The agency space itself—the behavior of the receptionist, the decor of the waiting room, and the way in which the social workers’ offices are organized—can determine whether or not clients feel welcome. A very small reception area and clinical offices with one desk and two chairs are often the norm in agencies, even though cultural minority clients tend to seek help as a family or arrive accompanied by members of their extended family, family of choice, or other members of their support network. When there is no physical space for them, the message, whether intentional or unintentional, is that people in the client’s support network are not welcome.

There are generally two main avenues to attain cultural competence in work with different ethno-cultural communities: culturally specific agencies and culturally specific outreach programs within existing “culturally neutral” service-delivery systems. Both of these avenues have advantages and shortcomings: unfortunately, culturally specific agencies tend to lack technology and have fewer resources, while larger mainstream agencies with outreach programs run the risk of treating outreach to minority cultures as an add-on to their regular agency services.

Culturally specific social service agencies were developed in response to Native American, immigrant, and religious groups’ search for grassroots solutions to their problems. For example, as a response to a lack of bicultural and bilingual

social workers, many Latino communities around the nation have started Latino-centered agencies. Social workers in these agencies often play a cultural mediation role as their clients navigate the acculturation process, helping them to access opportunities and advance economically and socially. To mediate effectively between these two worlds, workers need to be familiar with both cultures and ideally in both languages. However, the reality is that the availability of bilingual and bicultural social workers is limited, so social workers who are not bicultural are being trained by ethnic-specific agencies to provide culturally competent diagnostics and develop treatment plans for ethnic minority clients.

Culturally specific outreach programs within existing “culturally neutral” service-delivery systems are also very common among established social service agencies. These agencies recognize the need to serve minority ethno-cultural clients and are aware of their own lack of culturally grounded services and outreach programs. Thus in order to address their lack of cultural specificity, these agencies establish outreach programs staffed by members of the targeted community. These outreach programs are created as appendices to the main organizational and leadership structures, and the minority constituencies are often not well represented in governing board and executive positions. Starting an outreach program is certainly a commendable effort, but representation in the decision-making and supervisory roles is very important in order to ensure a horizontal rather than a subservient relationship with the main agency structure.

Regardless of the organizational pathway that an agency follows, staff must remember to avoid stereotyping the minority client and to keep in mind that every population is heterogeneous and every individual is unique. In order to avoid ethnocentrism, clients should be regarded as experts in the interpretation of their own symptoms, strengths, and treatment preferences.

While working with cultural minority communities, the worker must examine the insider-outsider role as part of any practice effectiveness assessment. Acceptance of the role of the outsider often allows the process of enculturation to begin. Enculturation into a different culture does not mean pretending to be someone else, but rather gaining familiarity and respect for a different cosmology or worldview. It is a long process, and it requires patience, open minds, and open hearts. This process can be monitored in supervision, and contradictory feelings can be identified and sorted out.

Social workers may turn to supervisors for guidance, or they may turn to a colleague in a type of interaction called peer consultation. Peer consultation allows the social worker to receive critical yet supportive feedback within an egalitarian relationship in which neither party has official responsibility for evaluating the other’s performance. In work with members of an unfamiliar community, consultation with a cultural expert (such as those discussed in the next chapter) is highly recommended. Note from the field 11.3 illustrates a possible strategy

NOTE FROM THE FIELD 11.3

Doña Matilde's Stamp of Approval

During a family violence prevention campaign involving *curanderas* (Latina traditional healers), the social worker coordinating the campaign engages the help of Doña Matilde, a well-respected *curandera* in the community who is originally from the Dominican Republic, as the liaison with the other women. Doña Matilde helps develop the contact list, co-signs the invitations to the planning meeting, and co-facilitates the meeting, which is held in her own home. Her role and respected status in the community give the effort immediate credibility. The social worker also gains credibility because at the meeting, Doña Matilde introduces Ms. Adler as a good person who cares about the community's children and youths.

for workers to follow when seeking entry into an unfamiliar community. These consultants should be paid and must adhere to the same professional standards as any other form of consultation, such as confidentiality. Community-based cultural consultants are best identified through referrals.

Either through supervision, consultation, or a combination of the two, practitioners can reach out when confronted by ethical dilemmas connected to cultural differences. Ethical dilemmas with a cultural basis often emerge when cultural practices and norms appear to be in conflict with the standards set by the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. For example, clients may express their appreciation for the social worker's assistance in traditional cultural ways that cross professional boundary lines. A family may ask the worker to become their child's godparent. In these cases, a combination of cultural expert and professional consultation may be advisable in order to arrive at the best ethical decision without alienating or offending community members.

The repertoire of social work methods and interventions utilized by a given agency may not meet culturally grounded standards. If a type of intervention does not feel right to a worker, the chances are very high that it will not feel right to her or his clients. Social workers should listen to their "culturally grounded radar" and explore possible reasons why such feelings of discomfort emerge. Social workers may think that they do not know how to work across cultural boundaries and may perceive themselves to be lacking the awareness and knowledge needed for competent practice. Not honoring their own knowledge and experiences makes them vulnerable to adopting simplistic recipes that may result in oppressive approaches to practice. Honoring knowledge and common sense can be a much better starting point for professional growth and effective practice. An important question to ask is "How can I be more in tune with and responsive to

the values and norms of my clients?" Social workers need to ask how their practice is consistent with their own norms and values and those of the profession. The practitioner's own background and professional experience, however, may not be sufficient to reconcile contradictions and gaps in her or his practice. If she or he cannot interpret or understand certain value conflicts, the practitioner should probably seek the assistance of a cultural expert from the community. It is not up to the social worker to decide in isolation what is the best culturally grounded practice for her or his clients.

In order to ensure that they are practicing culturally grounded social work, workers must screen evidence-based practices for cultural specificity. Interventions can be culturally biased even after going through the most rigorous effectiveness tests such as randomized trials. Workers must consider sample composition and contextual factors before unconditionally embracing science-based interventions. Issues of fidelity (Was the intervention carried out as designed?) and sustainability (How long lasting are the desired outcomes?) need to be considered as well. Very effective but short-lived interventions may not be the ideal vehicle for sustainable change in resource-poor communities. The blending of traditional helping systems (discussed in the next chapter) and practices with innovative science-based approaches is suggested as the next generation of intervention research.

When the assumptions or ideology behind social work interventions are not questioned, ethnocentric ideas can be perpetuated. Culturally grounded social work practice requires critical thinking and constant assessment of the needs of clients and the assets arising from their cultures, assets that can be tapped to propel transformative change. Identifying those assets and utilizing them effectively are part of an ongoing assessment of what is essential and what is not essential in the client's culture.

Key Concepts

Culturally grounded one-on-one interventions individualized ways of helping that approach culture as a possible source of strength for the individual, starting at the intake and assessment points

Culturally grounded family interventions interventions that emphasize connections between individuals and view interactions systematically and structurally, and in which the nuclear and extended family are approached as support networks

Culturally grounded social work with groups interventions that connect individuals with their cultural roots and explore what the group members have in common in terms of the past, the present, and their dreams for the future