

Cultural Competence in Process and Practice: Building Bridges

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SAMPLE CHAPTER 7 Process and Practice Integrating for Cultural Competence

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CHAPTER 7 Process and Practice Integrating for Cultural Competence

We have explored both theoretical frameworks and the specific kinds of information that social workers need to become culturally competent. As we have seen, acquiring cultural competence is an ongoing, lifelong process to which professionals are personally committed. However, it is also possible to gain cultural competence in working with a specific population by learning about the population in depth, and then considering the way that this knowledge can be used to offer culturally congruent and sensitive services to clients through social agencies, programs and services, and professional relationships. Knowledge about any group or population is a necessary prerequisite to culturally competent service delivery at every level from individuals, to groups, organizations, communities, state and national policies and programs, and international health and social programs and interventions.

The process of preparation for practice through knowledge acquisition can be applied to any group in any context. The steps defined here address many major areas of competence, but in working to acquire competence with a population, practitioners should be open to a wide variety of learning tools and methodologies, which may augment or supplement those included here. The process of applying the knowledge to understand and assess, and possibly to improve, the cultural competence of agencies, programs and services, and individual practitioners may also be expanded and adapted to meet special needs and circumstances.

The basic structure provides for two separate but related efforts:

1. knowledge acquisition relative to a specific group or population through cultural immersion in that population.
2. the assessment of agency, programs and services, and personal cultural competence grounded in the knowledge acquired from the immersion experience.

The outline provided below serves as a general guide to the Projects presented in Part II as well as to the project that will be suggested for readers in Part III. Although it is suggested that this process be done in conjunction with a field placement, it is also possible to acquire the knowledge suggested below in regard to any population desired at any time.

Part I Knowledge Acquisition

The knowledge acquisition process defined below can be utilized with any population group; in any context of practice, at the micro, mezzo, or macro level, at any time in any professional setting. It is portable, easily applied, and practical in any context.

Each step is designed to provide another dimension of knowledge. Steps in the knowledge acquisition process can be adapted, augmented, or re-defined to meet professional needs and circumstances.

- Select a population that is *served by your agency*, and is *different* from you in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion or worldview, social class, ability, or other difference.
- Explore the history of your selected group, especially, the history in North America or the United States. Journal articles, books, the internet, and any other sources may be used. If possible, include information from the Census to provide specific demographic data.
- Read an autobiography, a biography, or a story based on true experiences by or about a member of this population.
- View a film by or about the chosen population.
- Attend an event that is culture-specific. Ethnic fairs and festivals, religious services, gay or straight bars, support group meetings, and community meetings are examples of the kinds of events to select. While at the event, observe the reaction of others to you, and yours to them. Look inward to your feelings about this group, and be aware of your sensitivity to others' reactions to your presence.

Caution: Don't place yourself in a situation where you are uncomfortable—you may choose to do this activity with a classmate or a friend if you prefer, though it will dilute your experience somewhat. Select an activity at which you will be at least somewhat at ease—and *always safe*

- Interview a member of your population. You may choose a classmate, a colleague, a friend, someone you meet at the event, or someone you contact for this specific purpose. Ask them about being a member of this population and about their experiences. Please *do not* use a client as your interviewee as this will affect the client-worker relationship.
- Listen to music by or for members of your population. You can choose current and/or historical selections.

When you have completed these activities, you may want to organize and synthesize your experiences and insights regarding the population you have explored. The experiences suggested should enable you to gain an overall

understanding while also increasing your awareness of intragroup differences and variations. If you are writing these experiences, ensure the privacy and confidentiality of people you have interviewed by disguising names, identities, locations, and any other identifying information.

Part II Application of Knowledge: Assessing Agency, Programs and Services, and Personal Cultural Competencies

With the knowledge you have gained through your immersion process, you can now explore your chosen population's experiences with social work services with more insight. You can use your knowledge to assess the cultural competence of your agency, its programs and services, and your own competence to work cross-culturally with "your" group or population. As you follow the steps in the assessment process, you will need to keep your focus on your population specifically, rather than broadening your assessment to include other groups. You may find that your agency serves all of the needs of your population very effectively, somewhat effectively, or not effectively at all. You will also become aware of your agency's strengths and resources, which could be developed to meet the needs of clients in your population more effectively. Your assessment of your own practice competencies will validate your learning and also clarify areas that need further effort.

Field Work Agency:

- **Agency's Community:** Walk around your agency's neighborhood and describe the "feel" and appearance of the community. What do you note as the population groups that are included in your agency's community and catchment area?
- **Access:** What is the route of access to your agency for members of your population? Must they use public transportation, cross ethnic or cultural boundaries, or travel long distances? Can they view your agency as a "neighbor"? Does your agency provide outreach services to the population you have studied that are culturally sensitive?
- **Receptivity:** Does the agency decor, color scheme, entrance, and waiting room appear to welcome clients from your population? Does the agency's literature, reading materials, and other written material include members of your population? If your population might need these, are interpreters, signers, communications boards, tty (teleTypewriter), TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf), TT (text telephone), or other facilities available? Are there staff members who are members of the population?
- **Administration and Staff Training:** Does your agency have an ongoing program to train staff members, both professional and nonprofessional, in culturally sensitive and competent practice? Are there meetings, lectures, or retreats where issues related to diversity are addressed?

- **Staff Sensitivity:** From your direct observation, is the staff of your agency respectful of differences, sensitive to special client needs, and nonjudgmental? Do they use stereotypes or “they” language when speaking about members of your population? Do they use formality/informality and expressions consistent with client’s culture?
- **Funding:** Does your agency have adequate funds to serve members of your population in a culturally sensitive manner? Does funding allow for cultural variations in programs and services?

Program and Services:

You can explore your program and services by reviewing the mission statement, policy manual, and procedure manual, and by talking with directors, administrators, and supervisors using these parameters.

- **Effort:** Do your agency’s programs and services reflect an effort to be sensitive to cultural differences, to secure input on program delivery from members of your population, and to include members of your population in formulating and designing culturally sensitive policies and programs?
- **Quality:** How do policies and programs ensure that the quality of services provided are culturally competent, equitable, respectful, and accessible to your population and to employees of the organization that are members of the population? Do the expectations and criteria for service take into account cultural variations between your population and the dominant society?
- **Effectiveness:** Do the numbers of clients from your population being served by your agency reflect their numbers in the agency’s catchment area? From what you have experienced, how do clients from your population feel about the quality and quantity of the programs and services available to them? Are there unmet needs that are not included in your agency’s policies and program formulations?
- **Efficiency:** Do agency programs reach out into your population’s community? Set up linkages with existing community institutions? Use alternative service delivery systems to support clients from your population?

Personal Cultural Competencies:

You can assess your personal cultural competency skills in working with your chosen populations using the major social work processes as a framework and describing the ways in which you might use your knowledge of your chosen population to ensure that your approaches to your client are culturally competent:

- **Engagement, Trust, and Relationship-Building:** How does your population, in general, feel about using social agencies for addressing problems and needs? What help-seeking behaviors indicate needs for individuals, families, groups, and communities? What might be the culturally appro-

priate forms of address, distance, eye contact, touch, empathic responding? Does your population expect to be guided and directed, to make all major decisions individually, to consult with family and community members? How would you utilize ethnographic interviewing to learn about your clients' individual and cultural group experiences?

- **Assessment and Problem Definition:** What specific tools would be effective and applicable in assessing your client's needs and resources? How would you engage your client in the assessment process? How might your client identify problems grounded in cultural norms, beliefs, and expectations? How do you understand the relationship between your clients' culture and that of the dominant society in the lives of your clients?
- **Contracting and Goal Setting:** How would you define some culturally appropriate goals for clients in your population? How would you engage the clients in goalsetting and contracting? How might you need to adapt and adjust the contracting process to be culturally sensitive to your population?
- **Interventions:** Describe several culturally appropriate interventions, and some appropriate resources that may be called upon on behalf of the client within the client's cultural community.
- **Evaluation and Termination:** What are some of the ways that your population understands success or failure in dealing with issues? Is the focus on solutions, on diminution or elimination of symptoms and conditions, on inner change that may not be immediately visible? Who determines whether an intervention has been helpful and successful in addressing a problem? What is your population's cultural norm regarding separation and ending a relationship? Are there specific adaptation and adjustments, in time, in manner, in degree, that might be helpful in terminating services to members of your population?

Evaluation Using NASW Cultural Competence Standards

Review the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence. In considering the assessments you have completed, how do you feel that your agency, its programs and services, and your own personal cultural competencies support the NASW Standards? What suggestions might you have for improvement, if any?

Part II will offer examples of this knowledge acquisition and assessment process. These have been developed by first year MSW students using the guidelines suggested here. As you read these projects, you will notice that there is much variation between them. Some of this is a reflection of the approaches, personalities, and interests of the writers, but some is also a reflection of differences among agencies, programs and services, locations of the agencies, populations served, and the population the writer has chosen as the focus of study. When you begin your own work, in Part III, you will notice that you too will develop unique approaches to the challenge of developing cultural competence.

Summary

This chapter has provided a summary guideline that you may use in your effort to attain cultural competence with a selected population. In Part II, you will be sharing in the experiences of first year MSW students, who have used this process to explore and achieve a level of cultural competence with a population served by their field work agencies. In Part III, you will be asked to “practice” this “process” on your own as it applies to a population your agency serves. This summary chapter may be used to review and in preparation for your own work.

Personal Growth and Cultural Competence—A Final Word

It is quite possible to complete a course in culturally competent social work practice as an intellectual exercise only, and not to engage in the often difficult and painful process of reflection and exploration of one’s own personal values, world view, biases, and prejudices. It may feel “safer” not to engage, and easier to remain within the world view that is comfortable. Awareness of personal prejudices and biases in oneself is usually not possible in isolation—it is only a small step from self-awareness to awareness of the attitudes of others: family members, friends, coworkers, and fellow students. And with that awareness may come a discomfort and a disillusionment, and the anxiety associated with making decisions about when to ignore, when to confront, when to accept statements and attitudes by others that may have been heard before, but are now heard with new ears—new awareness and new sensitivity.

Yet, it is with these new ears that we can listen to clients, families, groups of people, community members, and others and really begin to understand their life experiences within *their* framework, *their* milieu. Professional and competent social work asks that we always consider the client and the client’s life situation from within the lived experience of the client, that we hear not only the individual pain, the individual need, the individual problem, the individual sorrow, but also the experience and history of the community or group of which our client is a part.

To develop these new ears, it is important to make a genuine commitment to cultural competence, despite the discomfort in varying degrees that this may engender. Social justice, our Ethical Code, and our professional Cultural Competence Standards ask that we make this commitment.

The students whose projects are included in this text have made this commitment. It is the author’s sincere hope that, in experiencing their struggles and their conflicts, the reader will recognize the importance of engaging her/himself fully in the effort.

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