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Cultural Diversity and Populations at Risk: Social Work Education and Practice

Timothy B. Dyeson, PhD

The purpose of this article is to inform the reader how the social work profession prepares its practitioners to serve those who experience discrimination and oppression. This article describes how issues of cultural diversity and populations at risk are infused throughout the social work curriculum leading to the bachelor's and master's degree in social work. Applications to home health care are made.

As people, we differ from one another in many ways, perhaps in so many ways that it is not calculable. On the other hand, we have many things in common with one another that allow us to join together in group membership. In the continuum between our unending uniqueness and our membership in the human race, we are all members of many smaller groups. There are many characteristics that group people by similarities, and these characteristics have been frequent means by which people suffer discrimination and oppression. The purpose of this article is to inform the reader how the social work profession prepares its practitioners to serve those who experience discrimination and oppression. Additionally, applications will be made to home health care.

From its genesis, the social work profession has been working with and on behalf of those who experi-

ence oppression or discrimination. The preamble to our profession's code of ethics states, "The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being . . . with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1999, ¶ 1). Many home care patients are often vulnerable clients because of several factors including living in poverty, failing physical health, reduced cognitive capacities, the potential for abuse and neglect, and cultural differences that influence health behaviors.

The dictionary defines *diversity* as "the condition of being diverse" and defines *diverse* as "differing from one another" (Merriam-Webster, 1998, p. 339). In many sectors of American life, we have quantified diversity by specific personal characteristics such as race, culture, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation. The social work profession has quantified cultural and social diversity in their code of ethics by stating that we should "seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability" (NASW, 1999, § 1.05[c]).

Key Words: home care; medical social services; social work curriculum; discrimination

NASW EXPECTATIONS

The NASW expects this process of coming to understand social diversity and oppression to continue throughout one's professional career. This seeking process formally begins when a student enters a bachelor's (BSW) or master's (MSW) degree social work program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). CSWE mandates that issues of diversity, oppression, and populations at risk be integrated throughout the complex curriculum leading to the BSW or MSW in social work.

For those who are not familiar with social work education, the advanced courses of the BSW are identical to the foundation courses of the MSW. In most cases, a student who graduates with a BSW is allowed to enter an MSW program to complete the advanced portion of the curriculum. A student with a bachelor's degree in another field must enter the MSW program at the foundation level. The full MSW program is typically a 2-year matriculation. A student with a BSW can usually fulfill the requirements for the MSW degree in 1 year. What this means for accredited social work education is that every student across the country is receiving an equivalent educational experience through delivery of either the advanced BSW or the foundation MSW curriculum.

There are five basic content areas in social work education: human behavior and the social environment, social welfare policy, social work practice, research, and field internships. It is expected that social work programs will integrate the concepts of values and ethics, diversity, populations at risk, and social and economic justice throughout the five basic content areas. For instance, the CSWE accreditation handbook states that social work programs will

integrate content that promotes understanding, affirmation, and respect for people from diverse backgrounds. The content emphasizes the interlocking and complex nature of culture and personal identity. It ensures that social services meet the needs of groups served and are culturally relevant. (CSWE, 2001, § 4.1)

Furthermore, CSWE expects that programs "integrate content on populations-at-risk, examining the factors that contribute to and constitute being at risk" (CSWE, 2001, § 4.2).

Each social work program, then, has to consider how these concepts are best integrated throughout their curricula. The decisions about how best to integrate these concepts are often based on criteria such as the mission of the larger university, the populations that are often served by graduates of a particular program, and the cultural uniqueness of the state and region. At Louisiana State University (LSU), we serve as the flagship public university in the state. Our graduates serve clients throughout the state, and our curriculum integrates the issues of cultural diversity that are unique to this state.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY INTEGRATION

I will now briefly describe how the LSU School of Social Work has integrated the concepts of cultural diversity and populations at risk throughout the five major content areas. Human behavior and the social environment represent a content area that examines interrelationships between biological, psychological, social, and cultural determinants of human behavior. The focus is on the major biopsychosocial developmental achievements and adaptations of human beings from conception through death. One of the learning objectives of a course in this content area is for the student to demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of human diversity including groups distinguished by ethnicity, race, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, physical or mental ability, and age. The student should also demonstrate an understanding of the impact of diversity on human development and behavior with special reference to specified diverse groups in Louisiana's practice environment.

Social welfare policy is a content area that provides a historical perspective of social welfare history and policy. One of the learning objectives of a course in this content area is for the student to develop an awareness of how sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and homophobia have permeated American society and social welfare practice and policy.

Social work practice is a content area that educates students about social work theory, values, and intervention skills common to social work practice with individuals and families. One of the objectives of a course in this content area is for the student to demonstrate a special sensitivity to individuals and social groups undervalued or oppressed because of their race,

culture, ethnicity, gender, religion/spiritual orientation, age, socioeconomic class, sexual preference, and condition of mental, physical, or social disability in the analysis of diverse families and individuals and a commitment to end oppression and injustice.

Social work research provides students with a working knowledge of qualitative and quantitative research methods. One of the objectives of a course in this content area is for the student to develop an appreciation of the misuse of research methods and studies to perpetuate myths and extend oppressive systems to the disadvantage of minorities, women, and disabled populations.

Field internships expose students to a wide variety of social work experiences and allow them to integrate and apply academic coursework in a field setting under the guidance and direction of a field supervisor. They also provide the foundation for reinforcing the nature, purposes, and values of social work; developing the professional self; and building skills to become culturally competent social workers. The following are examples of learning objectives from the field internship sequence:

- Engage and build relationships with diverse agency clients with respect to race, ethnicity, age, gender, spiritual and religious preference, different conditions of ability, family structure, and other personal qualities.
- Creatively use client cultural differences as a context for identifying a variety of strengths and overcoming barriers to the helping process.
- Advocate for nondiscriminatory social policies and programs that are accessible and responsive to populations at risk in the community.
- Match, plan, implement, and critically evaluate empirically based interventions with clients from diverse backgrounds.

PRACTICE EXPECTATIONS

Many home health care patients are considered at risk because of several factors including living in poverty, failing physical health, reduced cognitive capacities, the potential for abuse and neglect, and cultural differences that influence health behaviors. Social workers in home care are expected to provide services for “social or emotional problems that are or are

expected to be an impediment to the effective treatment of the patient’s medical condition or his or her rate of recovery” (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 1996, § 206.3). In many cases, social workers are called upon to serve clients because of one or more social or economic vulnerabilities that may be intertwined with an issue of cultural diversity. The competent social worker is trained to recognize, appreciate, and creatively use this diversity as a context for identifying a variety of strengths for use in overcoming barriers to the medical care plan.

Medicare also expects that social workers will interact with the treatment team by “participating in . . . inservice programs, and acting as a consultant to other agency personnel” (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 1996, § 206.3). Because social workers receive such extensive training in cultural diversity issues, they are well situated within the home health agency to provide in-service trainings on how issues of diversity may affect the medical care plan. In addition to in-service trainings, social workers are often able to serve as case consultants. Professionals from other disciplines may bring a case to a team conference for consultation, and a social worker can help explore whether issues of diversity are being considered in context to maximize the patient’s health outcomes.

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Timothy B. Dyeson, PhD, served as a medical social worker and supervisor in home health care between 1994 and 1997. He graduated with his MSW and PhD from the University of Texas at Arlington. He has been at the Louisiana State University School of Social Work since 1998 where he is now an assistant professor and director of the gerontology certificate program. He has been conducting research on home health care issues since 1996.