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Version Final PDF / published version


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AN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE APPROACH TO CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Izumi Sakamoto

I recently travelled to Japan to attend my beloved grandmother’s funeral. This personal and emotional experience stirred an awareness of my perceptions of culture, which I examine here in relation to cultural competence and anti-oppressive practice. At the funeral, my family members grieved quietly, silently wiping away tears with their handkerchiefs. However, confronted by the loss of his wife of more than 65 years, my grandfather was much more demonstrative of his feelings. Though he maintained his composure during the monk’s sutra in this Buddhist ceremony, he sobbed loudly before and after, crying out that he should have gone with her and that his life had no meaning without her. I was both shocked and deeply touched by the honesty and openness of his emotional response. Taken aback by the very vocal manner in which he mourned his wife’s death, I was confronted by my expectation that this characteristically stubborn and at times self-centred and outspoken man should weep quietly and keep his emotions to himself as many Japanese men (and women) would. In the following five days that I spent with him, he would repeat his sentiments—that he missed his wife, how his life would not be the same as before her passing, and how he, too, should follow her soon. While appreciating his ability to express his feelings so openly, I kept wondering, “Wow, how can he do that?”

Three weeks later, I am still troubled by this incident, not by my grandfather’s mourning, but by the realization of how dependent I had become on social categories and stereotypes. I had always known that my Grandpa was unique and did not fit the stereotypes of older Japanese men. Contrary to the Japanese value of modesty, he would often boast of how handsome and beautiful he and his wife had been when they were young, noting this and many other interesting details of his life.
and the times through which he lived in his nine-volume, self-published autobiography. Both my mother and my aunt (his daughters) understood his "dramatic" qualities (the equivalent of a "drama queen" in the Canadian context, perhaps) and were not particularly surprised by his reactions to his wife's death, though they did feel sorry for him. Recognizing the negative consequences of oppressive stereotypes, my family rarely imposed on me the social norms associated with being female. If social expectations were not strongly impressed upon me, why then did I find myself relying upon socially imposed categories in an attempt to understand my grandfather? What if I could only understand every member of my family in relation to stereotypes about "the Japanese"?

Although I write critically about the assumptions frequently made with respect to "culture" and "acculturation," I fell prey to the very stereotypical and fixed, culturally produced (and often "othering") perspectives that I passionately oppose (for example, Sakamoto, 2006, 2007). This incident illuminated the impact of the socialization/acculturation that I have undergone in the North American social work field as a student, practitioner, and academic over the past 13 years and emphasized the need to interrogate further the problematic views of culture in the dominant social science literature, as well as the notion of cultural competence in North American social work literature.

Somewhere along the way, I had come to represent "my culture" in the classroom and in practice whenever my "foreign" ways of thinking and behaving were noted by myself or those around me. Just mentioning "my culture" served to forge a space for me to breathe and to justify my differences in relation to my peers. People around me—often White, middle-class peers and teachers—were usually genuinely interested in my cultural knowledge, which was always a relief, as I otherwise felt silenced. Knowing that I was not seen as a legitimate source of knowledge outside "my culture," I found inserting "my culture" provided a kind of credibility that allowed me to speak up and a reason to exist in the classroom, even when I was silent. This experience is echoed in the findings of a previous study that examined the silencing of Chinese international students in university classrooms and how some of these students began to use their indigenous knowledge ("in my culture ...") as a strategy to assert themselves in classroom discussions (Zhou, Knoke & Sakamoto, 2005). Although cultural knowledge gave me entry to discussions, I was very uncomfortable representing "the Japanese culture"—how could I summarize the trends of "the Japanese" depending only upon my personal anecdotes and images portrayed by the media? This dilemma points to the potentially problematic outcome of relying on cultural knowledge to break classroom silence as a strategy—it can result in the self-essentializing, self-exoticizing, or self-Orientalizing of oneself as a cultural other. I also found myself censoring what I would say about certain groups of people for fear of reinforcing stereotypes or to counter the pervasiveness
of problematic stereotypes. For example, I might mention something about strong women figures in Japanese and Asian cultures to counter a stereotypical portrayal of Asian women as being quiet and submissive.

Fighting stereotypes is not escaping stereotypes, however, since the action itself acknowledges their existence and prevalence. I find an inherent trap, then, in the cultural literacy approach acknowledged by many scholars, in which knowledge of a culture must somehow be incorporated into cultural competence training (Lum, 1999; Sue, 2001), though such knowledge could also constrain one’s perception of a person from the given culture (such as my stereotyping of elderly Japanese men). To illustrate this point further, it is first necessary to review briefly how cultural competence has been defined.

Current status of cultural competence

In recent decades, cultural competence has been a prominent topic within social work, counselling, nursing, and other human service professions (George & Tsang, 1999; Lee & Greene, 1999; Sue, 2001; Suh, 2004; Torry, 2005; Williams, 2006). Elaine Pinderhughes (1994) notes that, as early as 1971, the Council on Social Work Education had already recognized “[t]he urgent need for training that would prepare all social workers to work effectively with” people of colour, ethnic minorities, and “any client who is culturally different” (p. 264). Many different interpretations of cultural competence have been articulated since the 1970s, some of which suggest that cultural competence is “a professional imperative” (Torry, 2005, p. 264). Leading scholars in the area of cultural competence in counselling, Sue and Sue (2003) explicate three primary goals of cultural competence: awareness (of one’s own values, biases, limitations, and assumptions); knowledge (trying to understand the world view of the culturally different client); and skills (developing and applying culturally appropriate, relevant, and sensitive skills). On the other hand, social work scholar Doman Lum (1999) proposed a four-dimensional model of cultural competence for social work: awareness (of own values/biases); understanding of cultural differences; development of culturally appropriate intervention strategies and practices; and inductive learning.

Although iterations of cultural competence differ, scholars often agree on the components of self-awareness, knowledge, and skills/practice. More recent writings on cultural competence also argue that the primary focus on individuals (social workers and service providers) is not enough, and that cultural competence should integrate multiple levels of practice—cutting across individuals, organizations, and systems while also addressing theory, practice, and policy (Sue & Sue, 2003; also see Chrisman, 2007; Pyles & Kim, 2006; Yan & Wong, 2005). Within these discussions it is commonly acknowledged that cultural competence is a continual process of building awareness, knowledge, and skills and
that the culturally different are not limited to people of colour and ethnic minorities, but also include other minoritized groups such as sexual minorities, women, and people with disabilities (Sue & Sue, 2003). Social work educator Charmaine Williams (2006) has recently articulated epistemologies underlying the various understandings of cultural competence and specific impasses arising from them, effectively illuminating the complications found in the literature pertaining to cultural competence. For example, viewing culture as a fixed entity in the context of discussions around cultural competence could be seen as a post-positive view, while advocating a dialogic negotiation of the meaning of culture within social worker and client relationships (for example, Yan & Wong, 2005) may be seen as a postmodern approach, both of which could have accompanying strengths and weaknesses (Williams, 2006). Ultimately, in spite of the significance and volume of literature on cultural competence, its current definitions are implicitly problematic, limiting both the utility and application of the concept, as well as the subsequent transformative changes needed in the social work field.

Problems of cultural competence literature and beyond:

Power analysis

Perhaps the greatest limitation of cultural competence literature is its overwhelmingly apolitical or de-political nature. Where analyses of power are lacking or inadequate, culture is seen as neutral, thereby allowing the systems of oppression (such as racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, Islamaphobia, ableism) that initially motivated the call for cultural competence to disappear into the background. While some scholars have touched on this point (for example, Torry, 2005), these critiques are often not at the core of the cultural competence literature, thereby warranting more thorough discussion.

Within this de-political literature, social workers are assumed to be culturally neutral and are also often assumed to be the White, middle-class social workers who constitute the “norm” (Allan, 2006; Jeffery, 2005). Miu Chung Yan (2005), in his grounded theory study of 30 frontline social workers, revealed that the cultures of the social workers were often controlled or suppressed (as opposed to utilized), especially in the case of minority workers:

To a few minority workers, the “Whiteness” image—that of a mainstream worker—is perceived as the standard by which they (and their clients) measure their level of competence. This sense of “Whiteness,” according to many of these participants, is embedded in their training, in their practice settings, and in the nature of the profession. ... Therefore, to be seen as competent in this profession at this location, minority workers must, insofar as it is possible, take on a “White” identity. (pp. 18-19)
In the context of “Whiteness,” the diverse social locations of social workers are ignored and their voices are silenced; this issue is also reflected in social work education through the experiences of diverse social work students (Allan, 2006; Badwall, O’Connor & Rossiter, 2004; Weaver, 2000). Whiteness is defined as “a form of hegemony that allows one group to use its power to dominate a group in a position of less power” (Yee & Dumbrill, 2003, p. 102). Given that the social work profession is based on “Whiteness,” social workers carry inherent historical baggage in working through a fundamental dilemma: in seeking to help those who somehow do not meet societal standards, the profession simultaneously reinforces said standards while also requiring the existence of a group that does not meet them (Sakamoto, 2003, p. 240). This mechanism maintains and reinforces the colonial dynamic that social work has historically negotiated with the cultural “others,” including Canada’s Aboriginal population and immigrants of colour (Allan, 2006).

Instead of adhering to the Eurocentric social work models that automatically assume the Whiteness of the social worker, I assert that we must shift our focus from trying to understand the cultural other towards interrogating the power-laden contexts in which the process of othering occurs; towards naming and subverting the dynamics of power that allow for the culturally different to be deemed as “other” in the first place. In short, I advocate a re-visioning of cultural competence that is simultaneously framed by anti-oppressive principles while also being open to different ways of knowing. If the ideological and theoretical influences guiding “cultural competence” are not named and interrogated, cultural competence can simply be reduced to the management of “diversity” within the current neo-liberal political climate, percolating through human service systems in the same way as “multiculturalism” and “empowerment” have done.

Anti-oppressive practice focuses on the analysis of structural oppressions and power relations underlying the issues faced by service users and user systems (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). While anti-oppressive practice has been criticized for its near exclusive focus on macro-analysis, key practice components have been identified and applied to micro-level practice as well, including empowerment, partnership, minimal intervention, organizational change, collective action, and incorporation of indigenous knowledge (Dalrymple & Burke, 1995; Dei, 2000; Dominelli, 2002; Pollack, 2004; Sakamoto, 2007; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

A cultural competence model grounded in anti-oppressive practice has the potential to challenge the underlying assumption that social workers in North America have historically operated from a position of Whiteness (for example, Iglehart & Becerra, 1995; Jeffery, 2005) and that it is unproblematic that our current knowledge has historically been founded on exclusion. At its foundation, a cultural competence model grounded in anti-oppressive practice requires a critical examination of
its own knowledge base, for example, recognition that Whiteness operates at the heart of social work efforts.

Next steps: Challenges and visions for the future

Decolonizing our knowledge base

One way to challenge Whiteness within social work is to recognize and integrate indigenous knowledges and different ways of knowing (Dei, 2000; Maracle, 1990) into our professional knowledge base. As discussed earlier, the North American social work knowledge base is posited as Eurocentric, Anglo-centric, or Western-centric, with White, middle-class social workers assumed to be the standard (Allan, 2006; McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1999; Razack, 2005; Schultz, 2004). Schultz (2004) advocates “a self-critical view of Western medicine and psychiatry” (p. 234), as Eurocentrism dominates health services, which, in turn, fail to account for the culturally specific needs of clients and often create barriers to access as well as to appropriate treatment. How, then, can we escape the Eurocentric views on which our profession is built? Is the body of knowledge on cultural competence not still within the realm of Eurocentric thinking? In the late 1970s Audre Lorde famously said that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1983, p. 98). Are we trying to dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools? Furthermore, social workers are professionals within agencies serving people who are disadvantaged and marginalized in society with government and external funding sources. How do we, as social workers, decentre and decolonize the organizations and systems in which we are located? How much change is possible if we are working at incremental changes from within?

To counter the pessimism and hopelessness that can accompany efforts to visualize great systemic change, Williams (2003) envisions cultural competence as a body of knowledge that challenges and changes the systems and theories developed in dominant values and knowledge and responds to the needs of marginalized populations made invisible by the dominant powers that control the “recognition of voice, expertise and status” (p. 274). Further, Hurdle (2002) suggests that a key to achieving cultural competence is to empower client systems to identify both problems and solutions, which should include the incorporation of indigenous knowledge and spiritual practices into the core knowledge of social work. As Allan (2006) reminds us, fighting against the removal of minoritized voices within the dominant history and knowledge is not easy; however, she also asserts, “In order to resist colonization, we must resist this removal” (p. 268). The first step, then, should be naming these incidences of removal so that social workers’ invisible practices become visible—an important part of an anti-oppressive approach to cultural competence.1
At the same time, Williams (2006) advocates that, to achieve this goal effectively, social workers must be able to incorporate different epistemologies of cultural competence into practice (depending on the issue at hand) and to avoid the limitations of relying upon only one epistemological lens (post-positivism, constructivism, critical theory, or postmodernism). Perhaps, then, there may be a way to deconstruct, decolonize, and re-construct the base of social work knowledge through the attempt to achieve cultural competence, for example, by integrating any of the epistemologies of constructivism, critical theory, or postmodernism. In other words, although I advocate an anti-oppressive approach to cultural competence (in the epistemology of critical theory in Williams’s model), such an approach must also have some flexibility, as needed, to incorporate other epistemologies as relevant and applicable, in the likely event that anti-oppressive ideology overshadows the attention to individual problems.2

Creating a positive learning environment for all

The importance of securing a positive learning environment for students, practitioners, and social work academics so that we can learn and change cannot be overstated. Williams (2003) suggests that, among the plethora of writing on how to teach cultural competence to social work students and practitioners, a discussion of how to create a safe learning environment is often lacking. She argues that discussing diversity can be uncomfortable and even traumatic, as dynamics of oppression can be replicated or accentuated in the classroom (Williams, 2003). From the perspective of a social work student, Billie Allan (2006) discusses her experience of spiritual injury within the social work classroom, where the norm of Whiteness works to silence and delegitimize the voices of minoritized students. While criticizing social work education for its failure to provide a positive learning environment, she theorizes her experiences from an anti-colonial lens and acknowledges the importance of peer support from other marginalized students and allies (Allan, 2006).

In recognizing the colonial history of the social work profession (Allan, 2006; Sakamoto, 2003), it is important to create a space for minoritized students, social work practitioners, and academics to examine the exclusionary effect of Whiteness and to subvert it through the incorporation of their own indigenous knowledge (Dei, 2000; Zhou et al., 2005). Building coalitions with similar-minded colleagues and allies for change (Bishop, 2002) can be a key for survival and, further, for systemic change.

Moreover, if necessary, this process should involve “the experts” (that is, social work academics) stepping aside and acting as allies to make space for different ways of knowing. For example, although I come from otherized backgrounds, I, recognize some of the ways in which accul-
turation and colonization have indoctrinated me into Eurocentric ways of thinking to the extent that I am able to perceive my own culture as "the other." Ultimately, only by engaging in concerted efforts to identify, name, resist, and reconstruct our assumptions and knowledge bases will we create models of cultural competence that truly reflect the diversity of the people with whom we work.

NOTES

1 Further to the removal of certain voices, Canadian voices are often not as visible in international journals of social work. To fight such invisibility, I have drawn from many of the Canadian authors who have done an excellent job in advancing the knowledge on cultural competence in recent years.

2 In this regard, an earlier work, arguing for fully incorporating critical consciousness into anti-oppressive social work practice (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005) may be seen as our beginning effort to broaden anti-oppressive practice from its sole focus on critical theory and structural/macro issues to one encompassing a different epistemological orientation that addresses micro issues. However, this earlier work was not conceptualized through a lens of cultural competence, and further articulation is needed for a fuller integration of these ideas. Pollack’s (2004) work on anti-oppressive practice with women in prison may also be helpful for thinking through these epistemological issues.

REFERENCES


