



Innovations in Delivering Culturally Sensitive Social Work Services: Challenges for Practice and Education

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Innovations in Delivering Culturally Sensitive Social Work Services: Challenges for Practice and Education</i>
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Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol. 1 No. 1</i>
Manuscript ID:	<i>11047</i>
Page Number:	<i>47</i>
Year:	<i>1998</i>

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work or its Center for Social Work Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

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Innovations in Delivering Culturally Sensitive Social Work Services: Challenges for Practice and Education

Yvonne Asamoah, Editor. New York and London: The Haworth Press, Inc. 1996.

This edited collection of seven articles addresses issues implicated in the goal of making social work education, practice, and agencies more accessible and acceptable to ethnically and culturally diverse clients, whether individuals, groups, or communities. The articles report the efforts of some social work educators and practitioners to design and implement ways to make services delivery and agency structures more culturally sensitive and relevant. They illustrate challenges involved in moving toward multi-cultural practice, as well as strategies for achieving cultural competence. The entire text was published simultaneously in *Journal of Multi-cultural Social Work*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1996.

As explicated in this book, the driving forces toward change in existing social health and welfare agencies and programs come from: 1) demographic changes that have occurred, and will increase, in the proportion of non-European foreign-born persons and families in the United States and Canada; 2) consciousness that institutionalized racism operates through policies and practices of many, if not all, established agencies, which represent the dominant values and beliefs of American society, leading inevitably to differential interventions and outcomes in services provided for domestic majority and minority communities; 3) the gap between the world views and value systems of developed, Western, Euro-centered theories and practices, and those of developing, non-western (e.g., African, Latino, Asian) societies; 4) the impact of feminist and Afrocentric frames of reference on social work practice and theory-building.

The editor's introduction is an invaluable orientation to the knowledge presented in this book. The various chapters deal with the creation of a multi-cultural agency, training for multi-cultural

practice, workers' "culture shock" in situations of cross-cultural misunderstanding, working in the Latino communities, managing diversity in the agency workplace, international dimensions of diversity, and striving to make universities just communities. The introduction includes an overview of each chapter that highlights its salient features, and can help time-pressed readers to select those likely to be most immediately pertinent to them. It is strongly recommended, however, that readers eventually read the book in its entirety. Although diverse in foci, the articles illuminate each other and heighten their invigorating impact.

The authors discuss demands of cross-cultural and inter-country practice that may confront social workers at every level of agency organization, from "front line" work to leadership in policy-making and board development. For some readers, it may require work to make connections between ideas that these articles organize and those more familiar from earlier learning.

Drawing on a variety of disciplines, each article interweaves research and practice, and half of them are empirical research reports. Readers not steeped in theory or other relevant literature will find useful guides to deeper exploration in the abbreviated literature reviews in some of the articles, and in the ample bibliographies that each provides. Vignettes, case situations, diagrammatic summaries, and experiential exercises make conceptual formulations more concrete.

The organizational and communication models which these articles advance envision nonjudgmental acceptance of deeply divergent value systems and norms. They encourage a concept of social work practice as a link between the human strengths and resources on either side of the cultur-

al divide. Practitioners face tough ethical issues when confronted with cultural dictates requiring conformity to views and practices acceptable in other cultures but repugnant to the profession (e.g., corporal punishment of children and legally enforced subjugation of women). The emphasis, however, is on identifying and modifying barriers in agency cultures and in the wider society in which they enact their professional roles.

This book directs social workers' attention to values, and to beliefs and their emotional anchorages, as core components of culture. The articles define cultural divergence primarily in terms of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and gender differences. However, the most intensely emotionally loaded values in virtually all cultures are those that have to do with sexual orientations, identities, and prac-

tices. Discussion of these is absent from this volume. Such a discussion is needed, because powerful societal norms assign majority and minority societal statuses, with all their implications of conformity and deviance, and the distribution of power, reward, and punishment. Sexual minorities are at risk of discrimination, stigmatization, oppression, and exclusion.

As social workers press on to greater comprehension of the functions of values in group and individual life, and the significance of cultural differences, it is to be hoped that they can integrate this dimension of cultural difference and conflict into their responses to cultural diversity and their achievement of cultural competence.

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