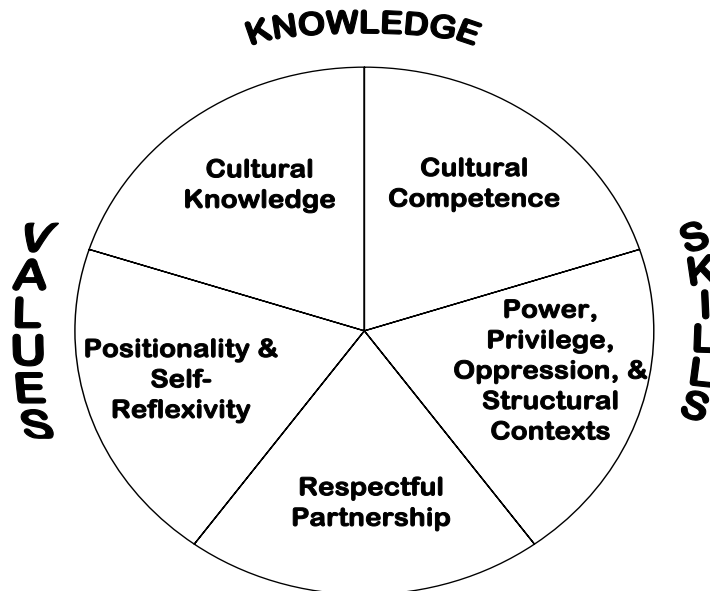


San José State University School of Social Work Transcultural Perspective – A Working Definition

The transcultural perspective is an important part of the mission of the San Jose State University School of Social Work...and the elements of the perspective are important in understanding and informing social work practice. Rather than having a separate course in diversity, elements of the transcultural perspective are infused in different courses throughout the curriculum in relation to social work knowledge, skills and values. Specifically, the transcultural perspective embraces five interrelated but distinct dimensions of diversity: 1) recognizing the importance of culture in social work at all levels of practice; 2) applying principles of cultural competence in practice; 3) understanding dynamics of power, privilege and oppression; 4) maintaining an awareness of ones own cultural perspectives, values, and beliefs; and 5) demonstrating respect in interactions with client systems. The model below describes the five core dimensions of the transcultural perspective. Each dimension is interlocked and continuous with each other, thereby forming a tightly integrated model.

Figure 1: Elements of the Transcultural Perspective



Cultural Knowledge

This dimension emphasizes the importance of understanding concepts and processes related to culture and how these intersect with social work concerns. All human beings operate in cultural contexts and culture informs how people construct both the material world (e.g., transportation, shelter, food, art) and the social world (e.g., definitions and beliefs about family, child-rearing, religion, kinship, social roles, parenting, health and mental health, aging, education, etc.) (Hutchison, 2003). This dimension of the transcultural model focuses on the discovery of key knowledge about the construct of culture as well as processes for how to locate knowledge about various cultural communities. Thus, the dimension highlights both knowledge and the process of inquiry. Practice grounded in knowledge of culture acknowledges variations among individuals, recognizes the importance of understanding cultural context in social work practice, and emphasizes strong generic social work skills and competencies (Williams, 2006). Students learn

about general elements of cultural knowledge or culture-general information such as the following:

- *World View*: a culture's way of seeing and understanding the world.
- *Perceptions and Cultural Patterns*: the specific frameworks through which cultural group approaches life and views aspects of life such as personal relationships, power and authority, social roles and responsibilities, and interaction.
- *Beliefs, Values, & Attitudes*: the core building blocks of cultures. Beliefs refer to the conviction in the truth/value of phenomena. Values represent the principles or guidelines informing a member of what is "good," "bad," "right," "wrong," "true," and "false." Attitudes refer to the learned tendency of a cultural member to oftentimes respond in a culturally consistent manner to people, objects, events, and contexts.
- *Behaviors (Including Communication)*: the distinctive personal and social behaviors of a cultural group (or the ways a group acts) in terms of all aspects of their life (private, public, social, workplace, community).
- *History and Traditions*: the larger historical contexts and events that have shaped a culture's world view and behavior. A culture's traditions and rituals also help to reveal the priorities and deep-seated beliefs held within that culture.
- *Social Structures*: the institutions and structures of power used by a cultural group and the interaction between that group and surrounding institutions and social organizations.

Cultural Competence

The dimension of cultural competence is critical because it draws upon the cultural knowledge and applies it to practice with specific groups. The primary focus of this dimension is on culturally responsive doing, or the ways in which social workers effectively apply cultural knowledge and skills to different cultural communities and contexts. The National Association of Social Work (2001) issued a definition of cultural competence that it upholds for all of its scholars, practitioners, and students:

Cultural competence is the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each. (NASW, 2001, p. 11)

This dimension underscores the importance learning and acquiring culturally relevant and responsive behaviors, attitudes, and skills that enable social workers to perform culturally appropriate and meaningful analyses, evaluations, decisions, and actions. Students are exposed to models and opportunities to demonstrate the capacity to work effectively across cultures. Students are also taught that appropriate behaviors, attitudes, and skills may shift and change depending on the context, the salience of the cultural identity for a community member, and or in relation to other conditions or circumstances. Thus, cultural competence is not conceptualized or taught as some certain, guaranteed, or "stock" package of behaviors and skills to apply specific cultures but as a set of tools and action guides that are largely culturally relevant but that are also open to revision and readjustment depending on the cultural member, situational conditions, and context. The idea here is that becoming culturally competence takes continual work, revision, reexamination, and redirection to optimally respond in a specific case or moment. To develop and refine these skills, students are afforded opportunities in both courses and field to consider appropriate approaches to working with specific case examples of diverse individuals, families and communities.

Power, Privilege, Oppression, & Structural Contexts:

This dimension emphasizes the dynamic of power relations in the larger society and how those dynamics are reflected in the practitioner-client relationship and the ways in which practitioners approach, analyze, and address social work issues, problems, and contexts. The dynamic of power shifts based on the social location and position of practitioners and clients and the larger historical and sociopolitical context. Power relations in this dimension are defined by three concepts: privilege, oppression, and structural contexts. In her well-cited essay on privilege, McIntosh (1998) identifies privilege in terms of unearned advantages, entitlements, and conferred dominance. According to Swigonski (1996), privilege is “the unearned advantages enjoyed by a particular group simply because of membership in that group.”

From this perspective, culture is considered in the context of dominant historical, political, economic, and social structures. Interventions from this perspective emphasize challenging structural inequalities, discrimination, and patterns of exclusion that contribute to problems among both individuals and communities. Recognition of dynamics of power, privilege and oppression necessitate use of a strengths perspective and emphasis on empowerment when working with individuals, families or communities (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999; Williams, 2006). Social Work programs across the country have already adopted an anti-oppression framework in curricula and many social work researchers highlight the dimensions of privilege, oppression, and structural contexts of power in a larger model of social justice for social work practice (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992; Parker, 2003; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Vodde, 2000). In our program, this perspective is reflected in the emphasis on policy and community practice in the curriculum as well as course content in which students examine explicitly theories that help understand dynamics of power, apply policy frameworks for understanding and challenging social injustice, and develop interventions that honor the strengths and empower individuals and communities at risk.

Positionality and Self-Reflexivity:

This dimension highlights the notion how ones social location, or positionality, influences her/his world view, behavior, research practice, and professional action. Such a dimension is important in that it refers to the social location of an individual (or in terms of where they come from, the different groups and social memberships to which they belong). Social location can include (but is not limited to) the following: gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, generation, regional origin, nationality, linguistic background, and socioeconomic class, among others. These locational aspects shape and frame how professionals, including social workers, interact with others, approach problems, and conduct research and analyze community settings. Simply put, our positionalities constitute a critical part of who we are, what we think, and the kind of action we engage in.

Self-reflexivity is more than simple self-awareness: it involves the ability to understand how ones own life experiences shape perceptions of clients and client systems, consider how meaning and identities are co-created through the interactions between the self and others, and to critically evaluate how positions in the larger social structure may influence interactions and power dynamics between social workers and clients (Heron, 2005; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2004; Kondrat, 1999; Mezirow, 1990; Rossiter, 2005). Constructs of positionality and self-reflexivity emphasize how individual and social identities and experiences shape how professionals perceive, engage, approach, communicate with different cultural groups in both practice and research contexts. The importance of understanding ideas of positionality and the capacity to engage in critical self-reflection are reflected in the program through class discussions, written assignments and field experiences that allow students to reflect on their social group memberships and critically evaluate how their own life experiences, values, identities, and social location impact their perceptions and interactions with others.

Respectful Partnership

There is a growing emphasis in helping professions to adopting an approach to working across cultures that is characterized by a spirit of inquiry and collaboration. Medical and health fields have increasingly stressed the construct of “cultural humility” which is characterized by integrating “as attitude of learning about cultural differences into patient encounters”(Juarez et al., 2006, p. 98). Similarly, the concept of “cross-cultural empathy” or “transcultural empathy” is used in clinical social work and other psychotherapy disciplines in recognition that cultural knowledge alone “does not help the therapist examine the socio-emotional world of the client nor elicit the individuality that distinguishes this particular client from other is his or her ethnocultural group (Dyche & Zayas, 2001, p. 247).

Green (1999) argues for an emphasis on a transactional rather than a categorical approach to social work practice which “expects differential expression of surface features within groups”(p. 19), focuses on the elements of culture that are salient to the client’s concerns, and emphasizes the use of an ethnographic approach to developing culturally appropriate interventions and problem solving. The capacity to approach the construct of culture from a position of inquiry and collaboration is critical in social work practice because it is unlikely, if not impossible, for social workers to be familiar with all cultural groups that they may encounter (Green, 1999). Furthermore, individual characteristics are not always in alignment with characteristics that may be attributed to the culture or subculture of which they are a member (e.g., language, family and kinship patterns, beliefs about help-seeking, family roles, spiritual or religious values, etc.). Approaches that emphasize cultural humility and narrative processes are also used to inform practice in community work and research (Harrell & Bond, 2006; Minkler, 2005). Consistent with this dimension, students are exposed to theoretical and practice approaches that emphasize respect and a spirit of inquiry in working with individuals, families and communities. Students also have opportunities to conduct ethnographic interviews, practice skills in actively learning about different cultural groups in policy and practice classes, and work in partnership with clients and client systems in field settings.

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