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Negotiating Difference in Social Work Practice: Role of Cultural Competence

Editors Choice

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Abstract

Cultural competence has been a popular approach to developing practitioners' ability through acquiring three main components – awareness, knowledge, and skills for effective cross-cultural practice. This conceptual model is often used to measure students' ability to work with difference in preparation for practice. However, despite significant attention on competency-based education, cultural competence is perceived as inadequate in teaching, learning, and practice. This qualitative study investigates cultural competence development via semi-structured interviews with 10 students and 18 practitioners. The study explored their learning of awareness, knowledge, and skills for cultural competence over three developmental stages: the Educational (classroom learning), the Transitional (after completion of the first practicum) and the Career (after entering the profession) in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research findings revealed that knowledge acquisition gained via the approach of learning "about" culture evolves into learning "from" clients about their cultures in professional practice. Also, three types of self-awareness: *Cultural self-identity* (T1), *Cultural self-awareness* (T2), and *Critical self-awareness* (T3), are defined in this research that is employed for building cross-cultural practice relationships. The research indicates that cultural competence means "enhancing the capability of a practitioner to negotiate differences in practice", which departs from the original implication of knowledge-based skills underpinning cultural competence.

Keywords: *Cultural competence; Cross-cultural practice; Reflection; Reflexivity*

Introduction

Although various definitions exist, cultural competence generally shares a core element of the ability of practitioners to work effectively across cultures (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016). Since the initial conceptualisation of cultural competence, *Cross Cultural Counseling Competencies* (1981) was introduced in the field of psychology, cultural competence has been a popular approach to cross-cultural practice across health and social care professions. Social work has been predominately adopted Sue et al.'s (1992) further work of conceptual model, which has the dimensions of awareness, knowledge, and skills for several decades (Gottlieb, 2021). The model is often used to evaluate and measure students' capability to work cross-culturally (Yan & Wong, 2005). However, evidence of the effectiveness of cultural competence training is limited (Harrison & Turner, 2011; Lekas et al., 2020). The current measurement may lack the accuracy to assess the ability of a student/practitioner to manage cultural differences in practice (Jani et al., 2016).

Cultural competence has philosophical and theoretical foundations and, for research, has sought to define skills and knowledge for cultural interventions in practice (Kwong, 2009). On the other hand, many authors have criticised the conception as too broad (Harrison & Turner, 2011; Johnson & Munch, 2009; Kwong, 2009). That generates variable conceptual definitions and conceptualisations, leading to myriad interpretations by different authors (Denso, 2017). Numerous conceptual and construct issues were also reported (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010; Denso, 2017; Jani et al., 2016; Kumas-Tan et al., 2007; Melendres, 2020). The ongoing concerns lead to uncertainty about the development and demonstration in practice (Lekas et al., 2020). As a result, social work educators may continually face constraints in designing programmes and providing guidelines and teaching. Students perceive the lack of a clear meaning of the term (Jani et al., 2016).

Cultural competence has been primarily conceptualised from a top-down approach. Thus, this study sought to understand the conceptualisation of cultural competence: by investigating three components in their implementation. The study examined the application of cultural competence in practice inversely by exploring students' learning of awareness, knowledge, and skills encountered in their social work education and examining students' and practitioners' subsequent application of these in placement and in professional practice. This article also discusses a process of (re)forming the concept of cultural competence in making sense through participants' understanding of their cultural competence practices in the work context.

Critiques of the cultural competence model

Historically, social work has imported and adapted theories from other disciplines. Sue et al.'s awareness-knowledge-skill model (developed within psychology) has appeared in subsequent social work cultural models and frameworks (Yan & Wong, 2005). Lum's (2011) process approach, which has similar elements to Sue et al.'s model, *contains knowledge acquisition*, *cultural awareness*, *skill development*, and *inductive learning*, underpinning this research's aims. Thus, it is explicated here.

Knowledge acquisition encompasses knowledge of a client's sociocultural/political background. Knowledge is often centralised by gathering information about the history (for example, oppression), norms, traditional cultural characteristics, gestures, communication styles, behaviours, and attitudes of specific cultural or national groups of clients (Nadan, 2014). *Cultural* awareness is imperative in addressing and assessing the dynamic of cultural difference between a client and a social worker (Lum, 2011). Both parties bring their own cultural biases, values and beliefs into that relationship (Yan & Wong, 2005). Thus, awareness begins with self-awareness of a social worker's own cultural background and identity, including recognising the worker's assumptions and stereotypes held about particular groups of people. Through awareness of one's own worldview, developing the worker's positive attitudes toward differences is also encouraged (Lum, 2011). Skills are often indicated, such as cross-cultural communication and interaction skills, and understanding of culturally diverse clients (Lum, 2011). *Skills development* is presumably the result of the ability to combine awareness and knowledge components (Nadan, 2014). Thus, the awareness and knowledge components form a substantial part of social work education. The Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training, set by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), specifically recommend cultural awareness and knowledge components and social work students are expected to increase their self-awareness of their personal, cultural values, beliefs, traditions, and biases as these may influence the form of client relationships with individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds. Knowledge of class, gender, and ethnicity/race-related issues is not only about individuals and groups but also demands an in-depth understanding of the environment and cultural context (IFSW, 2021). *Inductive learning* is strongly encouraged, ensuring that social workers maintain and develop their skills throughout their professional careers (Lum, 2011). These components are supposedly antecedents to cultural competence. On the other hand, the intertwining these components is insufficiently explored (Harrison & Turner, 2011; Kwong, 2009). As measuring someone's cultural competence is complex, and assessment of actual behaviour in practice has been less examined (Jani et al., 2016).

One major criticism is that most cultural competence approaches focus on knowledge-based learning and assume that cultural competence is achievable via education and training, which often signifies "knowing" another culture (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010). These approaches are often grounded in the modernist paradigm: culture is understood as a static and monolithic construct (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016). From the essentialist perspective, culture can be knowable by gathering information about specific cultural groups (Nadan, 2014). Such information, as knowledge, presumably applies to work with clients from that culture (Johnson & Munch, 2009). "Basically, the more we 'learn about' others the better skilled we are to meet their needs" (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010, p. 2158). However, the totalised view of culture, which assumes all members of that culture share values and beliefs, may cause stereotypes of the group (Lekas et al., 2020).

Furthermore, cultural competence training is influenced by ethnocentric perspectives predominately normed on white, middle-class, highly educated populations and an assumption that practitioners are Caucasian, while care recipients are from racial and ethnic minority groups (Kumas-Tan et al., 2007). Educators of those professionals seek to teach competence by exposing them to the cultures of “Others” – (non-western/white) ethnic and racial minority groups (Fisher-Borne et al., 2014; Lekas et al., 2020). Culturally competent practitioners indicate having confidence and comfort in working with culturally differences of the “Others” and the measurement often implies contact with the “Other” (Kumas-Tan et al., 2007). However, the practitioners may build false confidence based on the knowledge, assumptions, and stereotypes of specific groups of clients (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Since the earlier concept of cultural competence was constructed, our understanding of culture, identity, and society through an intersectional lens has grown as new populations emerge with greater acknowledgment of diversity in many social contexts. Social work has brought constructivist and constructionist perspectives into practice. Therefore, the essentialist view of culture and approach to practice has become problematic. Cultural competence lies within the expectation of a social worker’s knowledge about clients’ cultures; however, the information about specific cultural groups may not be an effective way to know truly who they are (Melendres, 2020). Thus, the term cultural competence is misleading: “[w]e cannot be truly competent in another culture” (Greene-Moton, 2020, p. 143). Moreover, the term implies mastering knowledge and skills in working with specific groups of clients as competence can lead practitioners to believe they are experts, which does not build trust and rapport in a helping process (Nguyen et al., 2021). With so many concerns about the construct, Lekas et al. (2020) contend that the training of professionals should shift the focus from content-oriented cultural competence, an endpoint central knowledge base, to process-oriented cultural humility, which provides for more person-centred practice. Cultural humility is a de-emphasis of cultural knowledge (Stubbe, 2020). However, “some knowledge about a certain culture can also build rapport and culturally-responsive skills, and avoid cultural pitfalls” (Nguyen et al., 2021, p. 278). These authors argued that both elements are needed for practice.

Together, these previous studies note that theory and practice are not well integrated. The gap between conceptualisation and implementation potentially impacts on the educational preparation of a social worker to meet requirements to work competently with culturally diverse clients. This article argues that education plays a critical role linking to theory and practice as theory is taught and knowledge imparted, with initial application in field practice settings, forming a foundation for practice. Therefore, this study explores cultural competence in learning and practice and addresses the gaps and links between the two. Learning inductively about cultural competence can contribute to improving social work education and practice.

Study Aims

This study, conducted in the first author's PhD, investigated cultural competence development in the current competence model implemented in social work education programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ide, 2021). It examined research participants' learning experiences of three components: awareness, knowledge and skills to its practical application and how they understand the concept and demonstration it in practice in the development process. The key research questions were:

- What have research participants learned and acquired the main three components to develop cultural competence from social work programmes?
- How do they make use of these components in cross-cultural situations?
- Are there gaps and links between educational learning and practice?
- How is cultural competence understood and demonstrated in practice?

The study received ethical approval from the University of Auckland Ethics Committee on 4 June 2015 and the data collection was carried out 2016.

Method

Cultural competence has been mostly constructed from underlying theoretical and philosophical assumptions to overcome cultural challenges in practice. A client–social worker relationship occurs in complex cultural and social contexts and understanding the actual behaviours in practice is limited. This qualitative research drew data from multiple sources: variations in individuals' perceptual experiences. Qualitative methods allowed the flexible collection, analysis, and interpretation of divergent data, in this case exploring the learning and practice experiences of research participants from various cultural backgrounds and at different stages of their social work journey. Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory (GT) (2014) underlying analysis of the data. Charmaz's GT acknowledges that the value of personal involvement and subjectivity in research is not gained only from the research participants, but also from the researcher and takes into account the researcher's position, privileges, perspective, and interactions integrated into the analysis as a research reality (Charmaz, 2014). Hence, the researcher's reflection and reflexivity requires them to critically think and observe their perceptions to identify influences that affect their understanding of their own experiences and those of others.

Sampling and recruitment process

Student participants in the study were those who had completed at least one placement in a Bachelor of Social Work or a Master of Social Work qualifying programme in Aotearoa New Zealand. Potential participants were recruited via flyers; two via university administrations in Auckland, and via a closed social work Facebook group. Snowball sampling located further potential participants.

The eligible practitioner participants were those who had worked for a minimum of 2 years in social services settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. The invitation letter was sent by email through the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) and Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) to their mailing lists of practitioners who resided and/or worked in the four regions in upper North Island. In total 28 participants (female) were recruited: 10 (6 BSW:4 MSW) social work students:18 practitioners. The ethnicity of the participants was demographically diverse, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Ethnic Demographics of Participants

Ethnicities	
European New Zealander	9
New Zealander	2
Māori	5
Pacific Islander	2
Asian	9
Other	1

Data collection

An in-depth, semi-structured, individual interview method was chosen to enable the gathering of participants' lived experiences (Hennink et al., 2011). The face-to-face interviews lasted up to 90 minutes. Before interviewing, informed consent was gained from each participant. Participants were asked about their most significant learning about cultural competence in their social work education and to share their most culturally challenging experiences on placement. Additionally, practitioner participants were asked to describe examples of both successful and challenging experiences working with clients from different cultures in their professional practice. Lastly, all participants were asked about how they understood cultural competence. The interview guide was provided before the interviews, allowing enough time for participants to reflect on their practice experiences and come to the interview with examples.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed and the qualitative analysis software NVivo version 10 was used to manage data and aid coding.

Data analysis

The interview questions focused on three areas of cross-cultural learning experiences: cross-cultural related learning in class, placement, and professional practice. Data were categorised into three different developmental stages: Educational (classroom learning), Transitional (after completion of the first practicum), and Career (after entering the profession). Those categories were further examined, comparing the development of cultural competence at different stages. Grounded theory entails inductive coding so that a theory or concept is built from the data; therefore, the analysis process starts with open coding of the interview transcripts (Padgett, 2017).

Through reading the transcriptions several times, initial codes were defined, such as identifying common words, expressions, and phrases. Initial codes were found at the Educational Stage, such as "Treaty of Waitangi" (colonisation of Māori – Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand), "Māori culture/Tikanga Māori", and "exploring own backgrounds" were identified, whereas at the Transitional Stage, codes such as "reflecting on a situation" were more commonly identified in their learning experiences on placement.

One of the significant activities all participants engaged in throughout the three stages was self-reflection. Their activities were divided into different aims/purposes of doing and these were generalised: (1) participants think about the self who they are and explore their own backgrounds: their race/ethnic, cultural and family backgrounds: (2) participants compare the self and others and recognise/address culturally similar to/differences between the self and the others (3) participants reflect on the self in a situation in understanding their actions/behaviours, emotions (frustrations) and thoughts in the situation. In reviewing and refining these codes (self-reflection activities) many times, Type 1 (T1): Cultural self-identity; Type 2 (T2): Cultural self-awareness; Type 3 (T3): Critical self-awareness were defined.

In the analysis process, the author also recognised her own emotions, opinions/thoughts and views on participants' experiences filtering through her personal and professional experiences. Self-questioning/dialogue of what the author thought to understand the participants' experiences and cross-checking with them was critical in the process.

Findings: Three components of cultural competence in education/training and practice

The research found that the components of awareness and knowledge learned from the Educational and Transitional Stages built a foundation that makes use of the skills for establishing cross-cultural practice relationships in the Career Stage as shown in Figure 1. The three types of self-awareness: Cultural self-identity (T1), Cultural self-awareness (T2) and Critical self-awareness (T3) were crucial for relationship building. The discussion now follows the progress through these stages with reference to participant experiences.

Figure 1: Three Components in Developmental Stages

Educational Stage

The knowledge component was the central learning for cultural competence in the Educational Stage. Social work education programmes and curricula are influenced by local contexts: geographic locations, population(s) served, trends in changing demographics, and social movements (Melendres, 2020). Social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand significantly includes the colonial history of the country (Beddoe, 2018), the subsequent oppression of the Māori people (Ruwhiu, 2017), and the embedding of deep and enduring inequalities. Students learn to understand the impact of contemporary Māori people, learning about biculturalism, grounded in the trajectory of Māori–Pākēhā (New Zealander of European descent) relations (Eketone & Walker, 2015).

Knowledge acquisition primarily employed an approach of learning "about" aspects of Māori culture that encompasses exposure to Tikanga Māori (Māori protocols) and Te Reo (Māori language). A participant explained her learning: "… in that [Māori] paper we learned a lot of key [Māori] words and phrases and we had to learn different karakia [prayers or incantations] and waiata [songs] and all of that kind of stuff." This exposure to Māori culture frequently occurs through Noho mārae (staying at mārae: meeting houses). Another participant described the experience: "We stayed at mārae, eating breakfast together and just observing protocols that was really exposure to the culture. I thought it was very valuable." Particularly, non-Māori participants found that being in the Māori cultural environment and interacting with people had a positive impact on their confidence and comfort. Participants also explored the Māori worldview through listening to Māori educators who shared their real-life experiences as Indigenous people in Aotearoa New Zealand. Some participants reflected on how Māori people might perceive the present society through their understanding of this colonial history. With that understanding, they could locate the concerns of Māori clients in a cultural context.

The second aspect of educational learning was self-understanding and beginning to process self-awareness. A starting point for participants had been defining Cultural self-identity (T1). They examined their own racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds by reflecting on life experiences and how their identity is formed. These activities were undertaken in classroom work and assignments. Some traced their family histories. One discovered her new identity relating to an unfamiliar culture. Those who come from non-Western cultures had a sense of the self, based on their country of origin, and also relate to religions and/or as social status as migrants, distinguished from Pākēhā New Zealanders and Māori people.

Cultural self-awareness (T2) was also processed by identifying differences and similarities between their own cultural group and other groups through working with other students. T2 frequently occurs in an everyday classroom context, where the class consists of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The finding is consistent with the ideal of Lum (2011), self-awareness entails both the cultural "self" awareness of the social worker and the cultural "other" awareness of the person being worked with. Participants from non-Western cultures easily found similarities between Māori culture and their own cultures. An example of this is a collectivist view of family/children.

One participant said: "… the important thing is we have to respect elders [parents/grandparents]. Normally we take care of them … Māori and Pacific families and like [her ethnic group], they're [commonly] living three generations together." In contrast, they found differences from Western/individualistic cultures. Another participant observed differences of local/Western students: "New Zealand students are active in class…" whereas [this participant] talks when sanctioned by the group: "… personally [my] character, is very shy, and we [her ethnic group] don't speak up much [students are not expected to speak in class]." The participants gained their perception of the self as part of a group by observing and comparing cultural similarities and differences with students in a class. The findings demonstrate knowing the self can be interrelated with knowing the "other" is exemplified in Karl Tomm's (1993) statement, which emphasises therapeutic conversation in practice, "our sense of self is generated in relation to others" (p. 77), is applicable. T1 and T2 self-awareness strengthens the participants' sense of self by knowing about the self: which is similar to/different from the "others".

Transitional Stage

During this stage, participants frequently engaged in self-reflection as they were placed in various cultural contexts in placements where they increasingly encountered and interacted with clients, supervisors and colleagues and these organisational environments influenced their cross-cultural learning. They reflected on specific incidents by recognising their actions/behaviour, thought and emotion why they acted, thought and felt in the way they did: Critical self-awareness (T3). The reflection process can be illustrated by one of Kondrat's (1999) approaches to self-awareness called "reflective self-awareness" – reflecting on oneself, who is experiencing. The concept stems from a Western philosophical tradition, George Herbert Mead's classic distinction between the "I" and "me" ; the subject "I" (the reflecting aspect of the self) thinks/analyses and observes the object "me" (the self as reflected on) (Kondrat, 1999). Self-reflection increases self-awareness – one can become objective and thus gain reliable self-knowledge (Kondrat, 1999).

In one example, when a participant attended an open group, a group member discussed her sexual relationship, and the participant was conscious of her strong reaction to this discussion. However, she did not know why she was stunned by her unsettled feelings in the incident and what had caused them. She paid attention to herself (object "me") at the time of emotions and responses, viewing them as an outsider in analysis (subject "I"). Through reflection, she recognised that her strong emotional reaction came from her own cultural norm: sharing such personal and private information in an open group environment was extremely inappropriate in her culture.

In the T3 process, the participant was reflective, which enabled her to understand herself from that experience; her judgment of the person behaving differently from her expectations created a barrier to listening and understanding the person who had different perspectives and lifestyles from her. She realised that she was the one who defined what is normal or abnormal and judged the other based on her cultural values. Through reflection, her thought patterns were changed and then her actions changed accordingly, eventually, she was able to

take clients' perspectives into consideration (what is reasonable from their standpoints), rather than her cultural perspective (what is reasonable from her viewpoint). The participant also became reflexive (recognising the client, their perceptual experience can be different from the participant's). T3 involving reflectivity and reflexivity will be discussed later.

Career Stage

At the Career Stage, professionals are required to manage cases effectively and strive for engagement with the diverse clients. Based on their experiences, establishing practice relationships – Early, Professional, and Authentic – can be one of the outcomes (demonstration of skills) from learning awareness and knowledge components. The process is illustrated below.

Early relationship: acquaintance

At the earliest stage of the relationship, acknowledgement of difference between themselves and clients is vital. T1 and T2 self-awareness assisted practitioners to be aware of the self, culturally distinct from (or similar to) the other, in a practice context. If they could, they prepared for the initial meeting. The approach to learning "about" a client's culture by gathering general information about the culture was useful here. According to many participants, greeting in the client's language is a significant act of communication that can ease clients' feelings of anxiety in the encounter.

Furthermore, the participants carefully considered their manner, which encompasses culturally appropriate behaviour towards clients in the interaction. The concept appeared to stem from their learning of Māori culture during their Educational Stage; many participants knew, for example, when walking into a Māori person's house and mārae, to take off their shoes. The approach of learning "about" culture has positively impacted on considering clients' cultures and demonstrating their respect to the clients.

Professional relationship: professionalism

At the next stage of relationship building, the participants prioritised their professional roles and responsibilities. They responded more based on professional values and adherence to the social work code of ethics and code of conduct during working with clients. The professional self can be more maintained while managing their own cultural (personal) self-influence; T1 and T2 are still applied to recognising the self as a professional and distinguishing between the self and clients. Kondrat's reflection process can be helpful in understanding being full use of professional self mediating a culturally neutral position and/or limiting one's cultural and personal influence monitoring by the subjective "I". Some participants asserted being culturally neutral is significant because staying within their "cultural channels" or viewing situations from their "cultural lens" can cause misunderstandings with clients and misinterpreting their problems/meanings. Presumably, cultivating self-awareness enables them to recognise cultural assumptions and biases that overcome the effect of cultural differences between the self and clients.

Authentic relationship: developing rapport

The final stage of client–practitioner relationship building is creating a good rapport with clients. Practitioner participants strongly agreed that a relationship is made through mutual contributions and sharing some personal aspects of themselves to clients, to a reasonable degree, is imperative for making a genuine connection with the clients. In the social work literature, the concept of the use of self in practice is acknowledged. In this current study, several types of the use of self as defined by Dewane (2006) in particular, use of personality, relational dynamics, and limited self-disclosure were revealed by the participants in their practice examples. Most commonly, participants did share their relevant life experiences by carefully divulging some personal information to the clients. Where they shared similar life experiences with their clients, making the connections between them seemed effective practice. They tended to develop empathy toward clients with similar emotional experiences to themselves and understanding the client's situated feelings such as vulnerability and humanness – using relational dynamics. One participant understood her female clients' frustrations: "You know, I've known what it's like to be a single mother with X number of children and or to have been an abused woman and to have social services not do the right thing." These connections led to a meaningful relationship, despite other differences between them. The authentic relationship may involve blurred lines between the professional and the personal since the personal self is the same self as the professional self, there is thus no hard and fixed boundary between the two dimensions of the self.

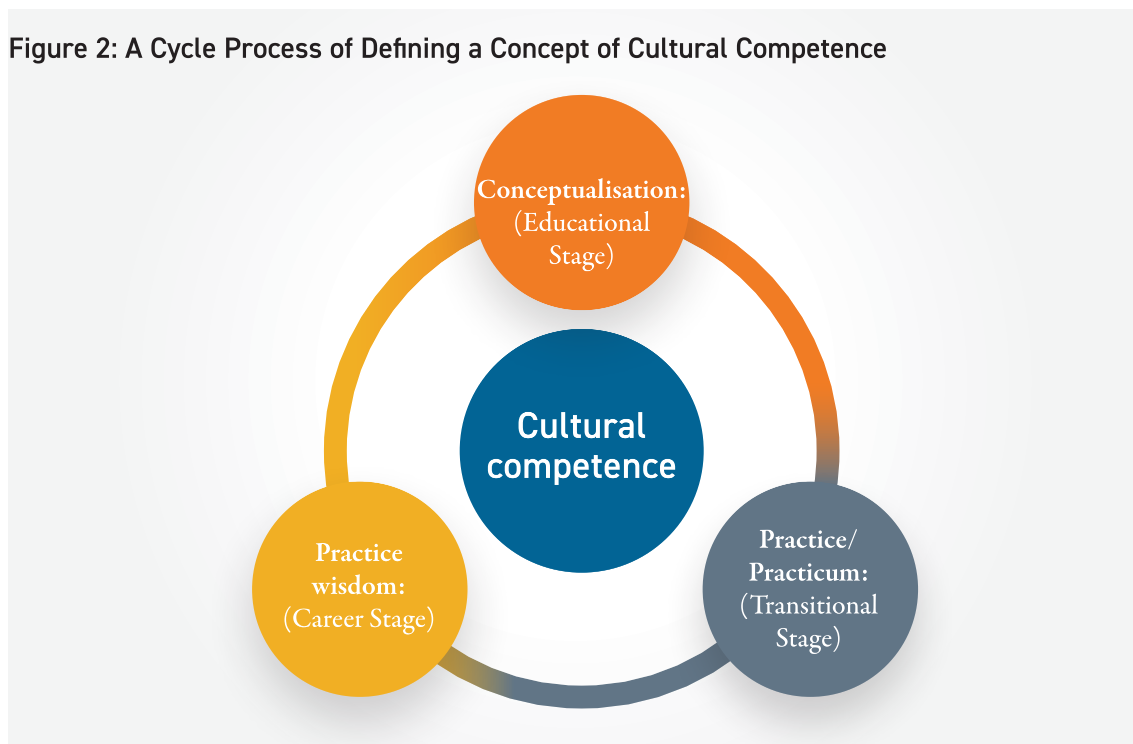
The three types of self-awareness are crucial for establishing relationships, knowing the nature of self (T1), and identifying the cultural difference between the self and clients (T2) in the Early and Professional relationships. T3 requires reflectivity that enables one to recognise own actions, emotions and thoughts and trace these for reasoning in reflection. However, it tends to focus solely on an examination of the self, excluding others in a context, and has limited application to engage with clients. T3 seems to be used in improving self-restraint of unprofessional actions (or limiting cultural/personal self); however, participants often feel a lack of connection with their clients in the Professional relationship. T3 also requires reflexivity in reflection that can enable the self to relate to the other by recognising and considering the other and their worldviews that shows in the Authentic relationship. Reflexivity suggests meaning, interpretive and interpersonal understanding of the self and others (Kondrat, 1999). The social worker's reflexive acknowledgement of their own subjectivity and assumptions may lead to thinking and considering other's perspectives that bring good rapport in client-social worker relationships. The above findings show that the conceptualisation of cultural competence is grounded in participants' practice in developing the three components from the Education and Transitional to the Career Stages.

Discussion: A Process of Forming the Concept of Cultural Competence

This section discusses the cultural competence development in defining the concept /term: how participants understand the concept and think in demonstrating competence in practice that contribute to their working cross-culturally. The journey involves an ongoing, cyclical process that has three junctures: *conceptualisation, operationalisation of practice* and *practice*

wisdom, and then back to *re-conceptualisation*; beginning at the Educational Stage and going through to the Career Stage. First, a concept of cultural competence is set out at the Educational Stage. Then students attempted to apply their learning in the practice setting during placement and understand "know-how to" work cross-culturally and the meaning of it at the Transitional Stage. New knowledge and approaches to practice (practice wisdom), which are more relevant to their own practice are generated from the process of conceptualisation and operationalisation when entering their profession and fully experiencing practice at the Career Stage. The process of practice wisdom can be explicated by Kolb's (1984), four-stage cycle of experiential learning: (1) concrete experience; (2) reflective observation; (3) abstract conceptualisation; and (4) implication of concepts. Consequently, practitioners enhance their own understanding of cultural competence (re-conceptualisation). The development of cultural competence moves through the cyclical process that is constantly learned from cross-cultural experience through reflection. From the process, cultural competence is (re-)conceptualised and cross-cultural practice is (re)formed. Each process is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: A Cycle Process of Defining a Concept of Cultural Competence



The *conceptualisation* of cultural competence led to the term "practising with minority ethnic and racial groups" is directed at the Educational Stage. The concept of culture within the cultural competence model often indicates ethnic and racial differences of the "Others" (Fisher-Borne et al., 2014; Harrison & Turner, 2011; Kumas-Tan et al., 2007). The findings from this research also show that Aotearoa New Zealand social work education draws heavily on notions of biculturalism in relation to Indigenous people, recognising both Māori culture and worldview as distinctly different to that of the dominant Pākēhā group. With increasing encounters and interaction with various people, the view of culture can be broadened. One participant discussed her placement experience in facilitating a women's group. She realised that all women could not be categorised as one group; they are from different backgrounds and have experiences that make them unique and individually different from everyone in the group.

The disproportionate focus on learning "about" clients' cultures likely shapes the perception of it as competence at the Educational Stage. This work found that knowledge of Māori culture is significantly linked with greater comfort with practising with Māori. Our research confirms the association between confidence and comfort/familiarity as delineating the good cultural competence that many student participants perceived. One criticism of the cultural competence literature is that competence is focused on practitioners' confidence in working with difference (Fisher-Borne et al., 2014). However, confidence is not validated in their cultural competence: the ability to work with differences (Jani et al., 2016) as confidence in itself does not give an indication of increasing cultural competence (Kumas-Tan et al., 2007). In this study, some experienced social workers mentioned that practitioners' confidence built within the familiarity with another culture, including practitioners who come from the same culture as clients, is not always reflected in their performance, noting that familiarity is not in itself sufficient for competence.

Operationalisation begins when applying learning into practical settings in the Transitional Stage. Participants made connections between information, knowledge and theory gained from the Educational Stage in their placements. However, at the Transitional Stage, knowledge and awareness components may not yet be incorporated for skill development. Each component is rather applied separately in practice. Knowledge of specific cultural groups is seen as encompassing strategies – interaction or intervention with that cultural group of clients in practice. Perceiving the lack of knowledge, student participants strived to learn more "about" clients' cultures. The findings here seem to be consistent with Johnson and Munch (2009), who argued that claiming cultural competence on the basis of information held about a specific cultural group is thought to have universal application to working with clients from that culture. Additionally, knowing the self helps understand others perceived by many participants, but how awareness of the "self" is relevant to understanding others is not clarified at the Transitional Stage.

Practice wisdom: The process of operationalisation continues at the Career Stage. Those participants who are/were in their early careers tended to confront gaps between what they were taught from education and how they practise in professional contexts. This might stem from the fact that the conceptualisation of cultural competence is not always reflected in cross-cultural practice situations. For instance, the approach to learning "about" culture from education has limitations. The fact that all clients of a particular cultural group do not always share cultural traits, such as beliefs, was observed by some participants. Moreover, self-awareness is not directly helpful in practising, such as resolving conflicts or building a rapport with clients.

When recognising the gap between theory/knowledge and practice (awareness of their own limitations), practitioners critically think of how they can work in particular situations. They seek out their practice knowledge kit in their practice learning from their experience. Kolb's (1984) four-stage cycle of experiential learning is useful here to understand the process of practice wisdom in detail. For instance, several participants received unexpected responses from their clients and were aware of the impact of the specific experience (1: concrete experience). They began to investigate the experience through reflection (2: reflective observation).

They realised that they expected clients to respond in certain ways (from what they learned about the client's culture) and defined who the client is like (recognise assumptions and biases), but that clients are all unique, with different perspectives which have been influenced by their life experiences and cultural and personal backgrounds. This reflection led them to change their fundamental perspective or interpretation of the experience (3: abstract conceptualisation).

Eventually, the participants attempted to approach their work differently (seemingly with their more positive attitudes to difference). They learned from experience that understanding clients is gained through asking about them and listening to them recount their life stories rather than defining their clients as who they are, and what their problems are, based on prior knowledge. This finding corroborates the idea of Williams's (2006) narrative approach to cultural competence from a constructivist perspective. The narrative approach does not assume that the practitioner can know another culture to which they do not belong as culture can be learned "from" the individual client (who shapes their own worldview) and the practitioner explores the collection of identities and experiences that produce and evolve cultural experiences for the client (Williams, 2006). They strengthen their repertoire of skills to be drawn upon, in the moment, and they gradually develop their own effective practice style, creating practice wisdom from practice experience. Consequently, the new concept is informed and tested in experience (4: implication of concepts).

Re-conceptualisation: Cultural competence has an important place in relation to qualification and professional registration for many participants during the Education and Transitional Stages. In Aotearoa New Zealand, social work registration is mandatory and registered social workers must demonstrate their competence practising respectfully and inclusively with Māori people and also with other ethnic and cultural groups (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers [ANZASW], 2019; Social Workers Registration Board [SWRB], 2016). Particularly for students and beginning social workers, registration is a verification of their cultural competence by the social work professional body. However at the Career Stage, cultural competence is no longer only about gaining knowledge and skills for practice, rather, it is about enhancing a practitioner's engagement with diverse clients despite differences between them.

Cultural competence is reconceptualised through cross-cultural practice exposure and analysing practice. It is not obtainable only by completing education and the successful negotiation of the registration process, but through the practitioner striving for development, continuous reflection on their understanding of meaning in practice and by integration into their own practice. They further their understanding of cultural competence in their own terms; they interpret it in a way that makes sense of it explicitly – from its implicit meaning through their practice experience of "working cross-culturally".

Due to the imperfection of the competence measurement with the complex concept of culture, the current approach reminds social workers that culture can be a clue surrounding client issues. However, we cannot define “them” (and their issues) without knowing each individual through interaction and dialogue. That is more about understanding the meaning behind clients’ words and hearing what they value most in their lives. Hence, there is no particular way to work but to negotiate differences with them, sharing each other’s perspectives and experiences and being more other-oriented. Cross-cultural practice is not a different concept from basic social work practice, which proposes providing the best care and support for clients with personal and social problems and finding out ways to work with individual clients.

Conclusions

This article has argued that social work education plays a significant role to guide students in the primary stage of their cultural competence development. The findings indicate two key points. First, the main educational learning of awareness and knowledge components assists students in forming practice relationships in practice. Secondly, cultural competence is not developed solely from classroom learning, but mostly from cross-cultural practice in integrating educational learning and actual experiences. This developmental process requires participants to be reflective and reflexive in the social/cultural context of practice. However, this research found that some participants struggled to process their understanding during exposure in learning situations and may require further support for students during cultural competence education.

This current research can contribute to our approach to cultural competence – understanding the transformation of the theoretical concept in practice for social work students and practitioners. Their perceptions of cross-cultural learning and practice experiences can give significant consideration (and rethinking) what it means to work across cultures or what students need to learn or gain knowledge and skills to support their growth for future professional practice.

However, this research involved a relatively small sample size. These findings cannot be taken as representative of all students/practitioners’ learning and practice experiences in developing cultural competence. More research is required to determine the efficacy of cultural competence teaching and learning. Additionally, the findings in this report are subject to at least two limitations: firstly, the influence of social work educators and their own understanding of culture and approaches to teaching; and secondly, the service provision attributes from service users and their experiences and expectations of services. Thus, it is also recommended that further research be undertaken in these areas. A comprehensive understanding of all attributes is required to fine-tune social work education to focus on cultural competence development and performance in practice.

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