**Position Paper**

**Teaching Cultural Sensitivity to Students in the Helping Professions**

**Gitit Broid, MSW**

**Ben-Gurion University of the Negev**

**Executive Summary**

The present position paper deals with the development of cultural sensitivity and cultural competence among students in the helping professions.

Currently, the most common term for describing the cultural sensitivity required amongst caregivers and service providers in the helping professions is “cultural competence.” This term intersects with similar and parallel terms, such as cultural sensitivity, cultural empathy, cultural awareness, cultural humility, etc., which carry a similar world of content and significance (Whale & Davis, 2007).

The term “cultural competence” was coined by the American National Association of Social Workers (NASW) as a “process in which individuals and systems react respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, social classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other elements of diversity, in a manner that recognizes, validates, and appreciates the value of individuals, families, and communities, and protects and maintains their dignity” (NASW, 2015, p. 13).

Cultural and ethnic boundaries are rapidly disappearing from the world, and this creates a natural need for life education and functionality, as well as for cultural sensitivity, in a multicultural society (Alvarez & Domenech Rodríguez, 2020; Mirsky, 2013). Health, welfare, and educational services, as well as the helping professions, all of which provide services to diverse groups, need to adapt employee training to facilitate an effective response to multicultural needs. There is a need to incorporate organized training and education for cultural sensitivity into the professional education of students in these fields, in institutions of higher education. In such frameworks, students should gain the knowledge and skills to work in a multicultural environment, and awareness of the complex nature of this environment.

There are those who call upon all institutions of higher education, half of which involve broad multicultural encounters among students, to adapt themselves to the spirit of the times and social changes, and add multicultural education and practical training in cultural and ethnic tolerance to their curriculum (Blunt, 2007; Deakins, 2009). This is all the more relevant for academic institutions training students in the helping professions: social work, psychology, and education and health professions, who must face the challenge of training service providers with a multicultural approach (Blunt, 2007; Otten, 2003; Furlong & Wright, 2011; Kratzhe & Bertolo, 2013; Seeleman et al., 2009’ Leask & Carroll, 2011).

A study conducted in schools for teacher-training indicated that multicultural encounters in these institutions amongst students of education and teaching may contribute to the development of “intercultural capability,” meaning, a long-term change in the level of knowledge, attitudes, and behavior toward “others.” These interactions should be reflected in personal and social experiences with individuals from other cultures and include critical and reflective learning about the relevant social reality (Otten, 2003).

**Sample Course**

As an example for the teaching of cultural sensitivity, we present the course “Cultural Sensitivity and Context-Aware Treatment in Social Work,” which was taught at Ben-Gurion University. This course is based on the collection of immigrants’ life stories by way of narrative interviews, and integrates the concepts presented above. It demonstrates teaching of this topic experientially by connecting theoretical knowledge and the students’ reflexive enquiry and self-awareness. A learning model of working with immigrants’ narratives is based on the understanding that the encounter with these life stories allows students to broaden their awareness of the immigration experience, transitions in life, and the contextual complexity of people’s lives (Mirsky, 2008, 2013). Listening to and analyzing these interviews also helps students broaden their self-awareness regarding cultural issues in themselves, their family, and their environment.

The course syllabus is available at:

<https://www.demo.erasmus-il.org/copy-of-family-and-community-in-the?lang=he>

**Student Feedback**

This course was intended for MSW students. As part of its teaching staff, it included two experienced professionals in the field of therapy who contributed a rich selection of examples from both personal and therapeutic contexts.

Student feedback to the course was highly positive. Many said that although they were professionally experienced, the process of self-investigation, and the reflection surrounding the encounter with cultural diversity and the “other,” created significant learning and constituted an important contribution to their professional work. They also noted that the atmosphere of openness in the classroom allowed for vulnerable sharing and honesty regarding the cultural diversity amongst the students, and that this in itself was educational.

For example, Shlomit described the learning process in the course as follows: “*From a professional viewpoint, it was fascinating to meet the worlds of the other interviewees. I have been working in therapy for over twenty years and meet people from different ethnic backgrounds, origins, and communities, of different color and with different stories, but I have never dedicated so much attention to the individual’s cultural origin, never made it present in this way...I began to listen more attentively to these stories and their impact on the therapy...the way I listen [now] is different...*” (Shlomit).

Most students noted the interview situation as a strong emotional experience that put them in touch with aspects of themselves, and sometimes with “blind spots,” from a multicultural perspective.

Shiran related to the interview she held with her father: “*I remembered the conversation I had with my father and how I was saying to myself that it was tedious, tiring...and then I came to the interview...I heard his voice, his crying out to be heard, that people recognize what he had gone through over the years, in a society that placed him in an inferior position, and the truth is, I was moved. I felt how much my father’s story was real, relevant, and present*” (Shiran).

**Recommendations**

From what arises from the literature and from experience accumulated in the course, there is no doubt regarding the importance of providing individuals in the helping professions with training in cultural competency, both at the learning stage in institutions of higher education and as a requisite undertaking at later stages of professional life, as part of an ongoing, dynamic learning process. In order to instill in students and professionals practical tools in the field of multicultural education, they should engage in practical experience as part of the curriculum, in addition to providing theoretical knowledge, which puts an emphasis on personal and group reflective processes. To achieve this, an open learning environment is required, one that allows for critical examination and the development of self-awareness, and how to deal with stereotypes, prejudices, and cultural blind spots. The course described above offers a unique teaching methodology, which was found effective and which employs the narrative interview as a tool for collecting and studying immigration stories and cultural diversity. The narrative interview facilitates a direct and unmediated encounter between the student/helping professional and the interviewee’s personal story. This gives rise to worlds of content as a result of meeting the “other,” and at the same time, enables the students to become familiar with the interviewee’s inner cultural world.

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