**Position Paper**

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

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**Executive Summary**

The present position paper deals with the development of cultural sensitivity and cultural competence to students of 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 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). Healthcare, welfare, and education services, and the helping professions, which provide service to diverse groups need to adapt employee training to facilitate an effectual response to multicultural needs. The need arises for organized training and education for cultural sensitivity during the acquisition of professional education in institutions of higher education. These frameworks are meant to instill in students of the helping professions knowledge and skills for working in a multicultural environment, and awareness of the complexity characteristic of this environment.

There are those who call upon all institutions of higher education, in half of which broad multicultural encounters currently exist, to adapt themselves to the spirit of the times and social changes, and add to their curriculum multicultural education and practical training in cultural and ethnic tolerance (Blunt, 2007; Deakins, 2009), all the more so in academic institutions for helping professions: social work, psychology, and education and health professions, which are faced with 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 of education indicated that multicultural encounters in these institutions amongst students of education and teaching may contribute to the development of “intercultural capability,” which means a long term change in the level of knowledge of, and attitudes, and behavior toward “others.” These interactions should be reflected in personal and social experiences with individuals from other cultures and include aspects of critical and reflective learning about the relevant social reality (Otten, 2003).

Sample Course

As an example for teaching social sensitivity, we present the course “Cultural Sensitivity and Context-Aware Treatment in Social Work” taught at Ben-Gurion University. This course, which is based on the collection of immigrants’ life stories by way of narrative interviews, integrates the terms presented and demonstrates the teaching of the 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 immigrants’ life stories enables a broadening of the student’s awareness to the immigration experience, transitions in life, and the contextual complexity of people’s lives (Mirsky, 2008, 2013). Listening and analyzing these interviews also facilitates the broadening of the student’s self-awareness of the cultural issue in regard to 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 enabled exposure and candidness regarding the cultural diversity amongst the students, and that this in itself was a source for learning.

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 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 a 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 what he had gone through over many years be known, 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 reviewed course 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 and the help providing professional with 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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