Skills Required to Work Effectively with Culture/Society

Culture and Society: Multiple Meanings

“Traditional” perspectives

**Culture** is “the accumulation of customs, values, and artifacts shared by a people” (Persell 1987: 47-48). **Culture** is “the human-made part of the environment” (Lonner 1994: 231). **Society** is “a group of people who share a heritage or history” (Persell 1987: 47-48). **Culture** is “the mass of behavior that human beings in any **society** learn from their elders and pass on to the younger generation” (Lonner 1994: 231). **Culture** is learned from others in the **society**. (Shriver 2001: 21).

“Alternative” perspectives

**CULTURE**, as “macroculture”, “refers to the dominant society’s worldview” (Helms 1994: 292). **Culture**, as “subsidiary” (existing within a **CULTURE**), is defined by Helms as “the customs, values, traditions, products, and sociopolitical histories of the social groups”. (This “adds the dimension of dominance and power to the concept of **culture**… an important element necessary for understanding differences between traditional and alternative paradigms.”) Although these definitions all emphasize similarities among the people who make up **cultures** and **societies**, “it is very important for social workers to be careful not to overgeneralize about these similarities.” **Culture** “seems to need both uniformity and individuality” (Boesch 1991 in Lonner 1994: 233).

**Culture** “must be viewed in the sense of the spiritual life of a people as well as material and behavioral aspects… this diversity is an essential, although underutilized, resource for understanding human behavior and the social environment” (Shriver 2001: 26).

Culturally competent social work is accomplished by requirements that all social work education be based on a foundation of studies in a wide range of multidisciplinary liberal arts and sciences courses.

“A liberal arts perspective provides an understanding of one’s cultural heritage in the context of other cultures; the methods and limitations of various systems of inquiry; and the knowledge, attitudes, ways of thinking, and means of communication that are characteristic of a broadly educated person. Students must be capable of thinking critically about society, about people and their problems, and about such expressions of culture as art, literature, science, history and philosophy. Students must have direct knowledge of social, psychological, and biological determinants of human behavior and of diverse cultures, social conditions, and social problems.” (CSWE 1992: 99-100, 138)

“…the kinds of creative, imaginative, and reflective thought that are required to grasp the world as it is interpreted by the client can be stirred by the humanities” (Goldstein 1990). Creative thinking that
helps us ask questions that lead us toward understanding the experiences and the worlds of people with whom we work, as well as our own, is centrally important to social work practice.

The transmission of culture

The transmission of culture can occur through socialization, which is the teaching of culture through formal instruction and rules. Transmission of culture can also occur through enculturation by “implicitly or subtly teaching the culture in the course of everyday life” (Lonner 1994: 234).

Other tools for practice with culture/society

The purpose of empowerment is the purpose of social work: “to preserve and restore human dignity, to benefit from and celebrate the diversities of humans, and to transform ourselves and our society into one that welcomes and supports the voices, the potential, the ways of knowing, the energies of us all” (Shriver 2001: 29)

A worldview focusing on mutual interdependence of individuals, families, communities, and the larger world rather than one based on individuality and exploitation of nature has much to teach us about living together.

A systems view of culture/society can help us to appreciate the reality of ongoing change in community life. A social systems view allows us to recognize the influence on communities of other systems and subsystems in the larger environment. A systems approach also acknowledges that influences among systems components and between communities and the environment is reciprocal. A systems view suggests that a community influences the larger environment at the same time that the community is influenced by the larger environment.

A strengths approach to culture/society stresses “connections, caring and personal accountability” (Shriver 2001: 540). Wellness and resilience both suggest that “individuals are best served by creating belief and thinking around possibility and values, around accomplishment and renewal. Health and resilience are community projects, an effect of social connection, the aggregation of collective vision, the provision of mentoring, and the reality of belonging to an organic whole” (Saleebey 1996: 301).

Julie flint