

1 *Cultural and Linguistic Competence in the Social Work Profession*

2 ***ISSUE STATEMENT***

3 Elements of cultural humility have received attention in social work literature, and it is
4 expanding. Cultural competence contains three elements: (1) cultural awareness, (2) cultural-
5 specific knowledge, and (3) skills (Abrams & Gibson, 2007). Cultural competence implies a
6 heightened consciousness and analytical grasp of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, class and caste
7 conflict, and cross-cultural and intracultural diversity. Furthermore, cultural competence
8 contributes to efforts to address racial and ethnic disparities in health and mental health status
9 and the disproportionate confinement in restrictive settings in the child welfare, juvenile justice,
10 and criminal justice systems.

11 In addition to cultural competence, social workers should adopt a practice that is fostered
12 in cultural humility. Humility demonstrates a caring relationship that is based on self-reflection
13 and assessment. Social workers should appreciate that their patients are the experts of their own
14 lives and cultures. A commitment to lifelong learning and acknowledgment that one does not
15 know their patients' cultures, and is willing to continue to learn, is imperative. This patient-
16 centered care allows for social workers to be humble, and respects the patient voice in their own
17 care. Culture is an ever-evolving concept and may be shaped by many factors in a patient's life
18 and environment. Cultural humility permits social workers to be cognizant and embracing of
19 change, especially in a society that will continue to be increasingly diverse (Lekas et al., 2020).

20 American society is undergoing demographic changes that heighten the diversity issues
21 confronting social workers. The 2020 Census reported that the largest single ethnic minority
22 group is the Hispanic population, who comprise 18.7 percent of the U.S. residents (Vespa et al.,
23 2020). The fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the United States is people who are two or

24 more races, projected to grow 200 percent by 2060. The next fastest is the Asian population,
25 which is projected to double, followed by the Hispanic population, which will nearly double
26 (Vespa et al., 2020).

27 The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the year 2030 will mark a turning point in
28 demographics throughout the country. Beyond that year, the U.S. population is projected to grow
29 slowly, to age considerably, and to become more racially and ethnically diverse. Between 2017
30 and 2060, more than half of the projected growth is expected to come from international
31 migration (Vespa, 2020).

32 Immigration to the United States by people from Asia, Eastern Europe, Russia, Africa,
33 and Latin America can be expected to intensify the diversity social workers will witness in their
34 practice settings. This demographic trend influences the need for social workers to enhance
35 culturally competent practice approaches that include indigenous groups and those from different
36 cultures.

37 One dimension of cultural competence is communication. In the United States, there has
38 been an increase in the number of people for whom English is not their primary language. The
39 2020 census documented more than 380 languages or language groups spoken in this country.
40 More significantly, there has been a continued increase in the number of foreign-born, limited
41 English proficient (LEP) residents in the United States. Over the past 20 years, the LEP share of
42 the total U.S. population has increased from about 6 percent in 1990 to 8.5 percent in 2013
43 (Zong & Batalova, 2015).

44 As the country becomes more linguistically diverse, linguistic competence within the
45 social work profession becomes more critical for effective service delivery. *Linguistic*
46 *competence* is

47 the capacity of an organization and its personnel to communicate effectively, and
48 convey information in a manner that is easily understood by diverse audiences including
49 persons of limited English proficiency, those who have low literacy skills or are not
50 literate, individuals with disabilities, and those who are deaf or hard of hearing. (Goode
51 & Jones, 2009, p. 1)

52 Individual practitioners and organizations are challenged to develop the capacity to use the
53 verbal, written, and multimedia communications to support effective practice.

54 Cultural differences are often influenced by belief systems founded in religions. The
55 values, beliefs, and practices of particular faith groups can be the primary source of cultural
56 identity and create a specific worldview that affects every component of a person's life. In
57 addition, people who identify with a sexual orientation or gender identity different from that of
58 the dominant society also represent distinct cultural groups. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, nonbinary,
59 transgender, pansexual, omnisexual, and queer people have their own cultural identity and
60 need fair treatment and inclusion in all aspects of life. Social workers of all sexual orientations
61 and gender identities must be prepared to bridge the cross-cultural experiences of people of
62 different sexual orientations and gender identities.

63 According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) about one in four
64 adults living in the United States have a disability. This includes mobility or physical disabilities,
65 as well as cognitive, independent living, hearing, vision, and self-care disabilities. The values of
66 culturally competent social workers should extend to people with all types of abilities. Social
67 workers should be mindful that disabilities can come in many forms. Being culturally competent
68 will allow for social workers to decrease health disparities and discrimination of people living
69 with disabilities.

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71 Professional interest in cultural competence among social workers is predated by a rich
72 and varied history on the subject and many decades of discourse regarding the profession's and
73 systemic responses or lack of response to the service needs of diverse clients. The settlement
74 house movement in the early history of the profession is an example of efforts to serve
75 immigrants, many of whom were culturally different from the dominant population at the time.
76 In retrospect, the practice was designed to facilitate acculturation of immigrants into the
77 dominant society. The civil rights movement of the 1960s marked the beginning of a shift in
78 focus from promotion of advocacy against the barriers to acculturation to greater affirmation of
79 differences and recognition of the need to offer services attuned to a client's view of their life
80 circumstances shaped by their cultural worldview.

81 The concept of cultural competence has moved through a progression of ideas and
82 theoretical constructs favoring cultural pluralism, cultural sensitivity, multiculturalism, and a
83 transcultural orientation to social work practice (Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008). A brief
84 review of the social work literature in the past few years reveals a range of content areas present
85 in cultural competence, including racial identity formation; the interrelationship among race,
86 gender, class, and ethnicity; racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic health disparities; work with poor
87 families; work with poor African American or Puerto Rican families; gender identity and sexual
88 orientation; gay adolescents; acculturation and immigration; spirituality and religious diversity;
89 biculturalism and multiculturalism; cross-racial practice considerations; work with people with
90 disabilities; outreach to American Indian and Asian American clients; empowerment; interracial
91 marriage; racially mixed clients; biracial children; mental health services for Chinese, Cuban,
92 Indochinese, and West Indian clients; sociocultural models of practice; and training of culturally

93 sensitive practitioners.

94 The differential treatment that members of diverse groups experience is a function of the
95 dynamic interaction with the dominant culture of American society, which in turn contributes to
96 the values, beliefs, and practices adopted by the group. It is important for social workers to
97 acquire advanced skills and abilities to advocate for clients against the underlying devaluation
98 of cultural experiences based on difference and oppression. This mandate is addressed to social
99 workers of all cultures, not just those who are members of historically and currently
100 underserved, underrepresented, and oppressed groups. All social workers need to master
101 culturally competent knowledge and skills because the pluralistic society is a social reality
102 (Gould, 1995).

103 Cultural competence requires awareness. The quest for authentic cultural competence is
104 a process of becoming more attuned to how clients experience their uniqueness, deal with their
105 differences and similarities, and cope with a sociopolitical environment that is often
106 unconcerned with the welfare of their people, however diverse their needs may be. Culturally
107 competent social work practice starts with the driving assumption of individual uniqueness
108 connected to humanness, and the individual experience of culture through which reality is seen
109 and meaning is interpreted (Congress & Kung, 2013). Social workers' self-awareness of their
110 own cultures is as fundamental to culturally competent practice as the informed assumptions
111 about clients' cultural background and experiences. Just as the advocacy agenda is applicable to
112 social workers of dominant groups, the development of cross-cultural skills is requisite for all
113 social workers, including those from historically and actively oppressed, underserved, and
114 underrepresented populations. This expectation is important because of intragroup variability
115 and because any given individual is a member of multiple cultures.

116 Further, cultural competence necessitates integration of anti-oppression and anti-racist
117 principles into social work practice and professional development, with active participation in
118 the abolishment and transformation of systems and service models recognized to be harmful to
119 marginalized communities and those most impacted by these services. Social work values
120 affirms that social work practice should be guided by those who are most impacted and that the
121 role of social workers should be as allies, leveraging positional privilege and power to include,
122 collaborate with, and truly serve these individuals and communities.

123 Although the discussion of culture often isolates people by virtue of race, ethnicity,
124 religion, nationality, gender, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical ability, and
125 other attributes, people represent intersections of these various cultural groups. Cultural
126 competence requires the capacity to recognize the interaction of these multiple identities at the
127 individual, family, group, neighborhood, and community levels and discern the salient cultural
128 issues within any given helping relationship. Cultural competence requires a heightened
129 consciousness of how clients experience their uniqueness and deal with their differences and
130 similarities within a larger social context (National Association of Social Workers [NASW],
131 2001, 2007).

132 The complexities associated with cultural diversity in the United States affect all aspects
133 of professional social work practice, requiring social workers to deliver culturally competent
134 services to a broad range of clients. Cultural and linguistic competence requires knowledge,
135 skills, and attitudes that promote and support respectful and effective cross-cultural
136 communication and practice. To that end, efforts are required at the micro-, mezzo-, and macro-
137 practice levels to affect direct practice and supervision, program administration, and social
138 policy to achieve meaningful outcomes as defined by consumers, families, and communities.

139 Social workers using a person-in-environment framework for assessment rely on
140 important cultural factors that have meaning for clients and reflect the culture of the world
141 around them. Although social work has been concerned primarily with race and ethnicity,
142 progress has been made to develop culturally competent skills, knowledge, and values that are
143 transferable when working with people of a different gender, social class, religion or spiritual
144 belief, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, and level of ability. This kind of sophisticated
145 cultural competence may not come naturally to social workers and requires a high level of
146 professionalism. This policy statement speaks to the importance of a clear definition, support
147 for, and encouragement of advanced-level social work practice skills and knowledge that
148 promotes cultural competence among all social workers so that they can respond effectively,
149 competently, and sensitively to the diversity among the people they serve, the agencies where
150 they work, and the communities in which they live.

151 Cultural competence and cultural humility link the theoretical and practice knowledge
152 base that defines social work expertise. Increasing cultural competence and cultural humility
153 within the profession requires efforts to recruit and retain as diverse a group of social workers
154 as possible, many of whom bring some “indigenous” cultural competence to the profession. In
155 addition, cultural competence requires efforts to increase avenues for the acquisition of
156 culturally competent skills by all social workers. Indigenous cultural competence is a result of
157 absorbing positive and negative cultural memories through lifelong experiences, which can be
158 an advantage as well as an obstacle when the workers confront the subjective qualities of
159 sharing the same cultural experiences as their clients.

160 Cultural competence is not, necessarily, synonymous with cultural identity or
161 consciousness. For example, a Latino social worker is not inherently culturally competent when

162 working with Latino clients; that is, it is not the social worker's ethnicity that makes them
163 effective when dealing with clients of similar heritage. Rather, it is the combination of the
164 social worker's cultural history that is mediated through their social work training that makes
165 for effective social work practice. This training emphasizes focus on the client context of
166 socioeconomic status, race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, age, and
167 abilities—all of which may vary among clients who share an ethnic heritage. When social
168 workers have little contact with people who are culturally different, it can be helpful to acquire
169 additional knowledge and awareness to increase one's capacity for cultural competence through
170 cognitive methods that lead to effective insight. The profession is committed to enhancing
171 culturally competent social work practice by addressing the needs of both indigenous workers
172 and those from different cultures struggling to acquire competence.

173 Cultural competence builds on the profession's stance on self-determination and
174 individual dignity and worth, adding inclusion, tolerance, and respect for diversity in all its
175 forms. Social workers know the importance of developing practices that are sensitive to different
176 races, nationalities, language proficiencies, and immigration or migration experiences. Social
177 workers are keenly aware of the deleterious effects of racism, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism,
178 homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia on clients' lives and how social advocacy and action
179 can serve to empower diverse clients and communities. This policy statement reinforces this
180 awareness but moves the discussion toward the development of clearer guidelines, goals, and
181 objectives for the future of social work practice in which cultural diversity will increase in
182 complexity.

183 ***POLICY STATEMENT***

184 NASW seeks to promote cultural and linguistic competence in all areas of social work practice,

185 research, and education. Social workers must honor the ethical responsibility to be culturally
186 competent practitioners as the NASW (2021) *Code of Ethics* instructs. This policy statement
187 adopts the definition of *cultural competence* offered by Cross et al. (1989) as “a set of
188 congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system or agency or among
189 professionals and enables the system, agency, or professionals to work effectively in cross-
190 cultural situations” (p. 13). The word “culture” is used because it implies a pattern of thoughts,
191 communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious,
192 or social group. The word “competence” is used because it implies having the capacity to
193 function effectively. A culturally competent system of care acknowledges and incorporates the
194 importance of culture, the assessment of cross-cultural relations, vigilance toward the dynamics
195 that result from cultural differences, the expansion of cultural knowledge, and the adaptation of
196 services (Cross et al., 1989; NASW, 2001) to improve quality of life for all people.

197 NASW promotes and supports the implementation of cultural and linguistic competence
198 at three intersecting levels: the individual, institutional, and societal. Cultural competence
199 requires social workers to examine their own cultural backgrounds and identities while seeking
200 out the necessary knowledge, skills, and values that can enhance the delivery of services to
201 people with varying cultural experiences associated with their race, ethnicity, gender, class,
202 sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, age, or disability. Culturally competent practice is a
203 critical component of professional social work expertise in all practice settings that include, but
204 are not limited to, direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation,
205 administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation,
206 education, and research and evaluation.

207 Social workers must practice with cultural competence regardless of the modality of

208 service, including when providing telehealth and in-person care. Social workers who use
209 technology to provide services should obtain and maintain the knowledge and skills required to
210 do so in a safe, competent, and ethical manner. Social workers must be sensitive to the client's
211 culture, including the client's cultural community and linguistic, social, and economic
212 environment and address cultural competency issues affecting the use of technology in practice
213 (NASW, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, and Clinical
214 Social Work Association, 2017).

215 Culturally competent social work practice cannot occur within a vacuum. It requires an
216 institutional and professional infrastructure that supports, sustains, and resources the efforts of
217 individual practitioners to conduct themselves in a culturally competent manner. In addition,
218 social workers should be respectful of cultural diversity among colleagues in the workplace
219 setting, creating an atmosphere of open acceptance and inclusion. This means that the
220 organization must have policies, procedures, and financial allocations that support and reward
221 the growth and development of the staff. Furthermore, organizational philosophy, policies, and
222 procedures can serve to ensure that suitable structures and practices are designed, funded,
223 staffed, implemented, and evaluated to achieve the most effective and acceptable services for
224 culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Through partnerships with consumers,
225 families, and cultural communities, social work institutions can successfully improve access to
226 services.

227 It is the position of NASW that social policy be developed at the local, state, and national
228 levels to promote cultural and linguistic competence. Such policies should assert the expectation
229 of cultural and linguistic competence, institute the structures and financing to facilitate cultural
230 and linguistic competence, and demand accountability of institutions and practitioners for

231 cultural and linguistic competence. These policies address human resources and program factors
232 that promote the recruitment and retention of a culturally diverse workforce, require specific
233 educational preparation and continued professional development in cultural and linguistic
234 competence of the workforce, and establish strategies to monitor and evaluate service outcomes
235 for people of diverse cultures. These social policies are needed not only to address the
236 requirements of cultural and linguistic competence, but also to help advance the work against the
237 continued expressions of racism, prejudice, bias, and discrimination in this country.

238 NASW supports access to services and care for diverse populations and policies that
239 encourage inclusion of culturally and linguistically competent care. The development of
240 partnerships in diverse communities where there is grassroots organizing and capacity building
241 will increase access to services. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (P.L.
242 111-148) provisions address ways to increase access to healthcare for diverse groups, including
243 people with LEP (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.).

244 NASW recognizes that the expertise required for the development of acceptable and
245 effective interventions for diverse populations resides within those populations. It is the position
246 of NASW that collaboration with consumers, families, and cultural communities is a
247 precondition for creation of culturally and linguistically competent services, reasonable
248 accommodations, interventions, programs, and policies.

249 It is the position of NASW that practitioners and their host organizations ensure that
250 services are offered in the language preferred by the consumers and families receiving services.
251 In addition, NASW supports actions given to improving linguistic competence and a diverse
252 workforce in the social work profession. Linguistic competence requires the growth in capacity
253 to use the preferred language of the consumer and also to develop the skills to use effective

254 strategies for interpretation and translation. Several strategies that organizations can pursue
255 include modifications in staffing and operations, such as the inclusion of bilingual and bicultural
256 staff; foreign language interpretation services; use of cultural brokers; provision of materials in
257 alternative formats such as audiotape, Braille, enlarged print; and print materials in easy-to-read,
258 low-literacy, picture, and symbol formats (Goode & Jones, 2009).

259 NASW recognizes that a policy statement alone cannot fully define the values,
260 knowledge, and skills required for culturally and linguistically competent practice. Cultural
261 competence and cultural humility are important ingredients of professional competence, as
262 important as any other component that forms the basis of the theoretical and clinical knowledge
263 that defines social work expertise. This policy statement supports and encourages promulgation
264 and adherence to the *Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work*
265 *Practice* (NASW, 2015).

266 NASW supports the advancement of practice models that have relevance for the range
267 of needs and services represented by diverse client populations and promotes the application of
268 practices for which there is evidence of effectiveness for the relevant cultural group and the
269 development of a knowledge base that emanates for the practice within and on behalf of
270 cultural communities. As advocates for the providers and consumers of social work services,
271 social workers need to promote cultural competence by supporting the evaluation of delivery of
272 services and practice models that are offered as cultural competence. In monitoring cultural
273 competence and cultural humility among social workers, the establishment of mechanisms for
274 obtaining direct feedback from clients is essential. The social work profession is encouraged to
275 take proactive measures to ensure cultural competence and cultural humility are an integral part
276 of initial and continuing social work education and practice and to increase research and

277 scholarship among its professionals.

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