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Introduction
In the United States, there has been a continued population demographic shift, with an increase of people of color from diverse cultures and ethnic identities. Many of these families who seek social services are poor, immigrants, or survivors of generations of racism and discrimination. For many social workers, this change in demographics can mean increased exposure to the complexities and richness of diverse experiences and needs which are reflected in caseloads, communities, and work places.

Simultaneously—for social workers, organizations, and communities—these experiences with culturally diverse populations present both challenges and opportunities for personal, professional, organizational and community growth. Culturally competent practices must be integral parts in the provision of services, agency operations, and policies. By understanding the perspective from which families view the world, as well as the elements of culture and cultural-specific variables, social workers can deliver appropriate services amidst the complex issues presented within a multicultural context.

Demographic Changes
According to the U.S. Census Bureau, it is estimated that by 2060, Hispanics will represent the greatest immigration population in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). It is also projected that immigration to the United States by people from Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America will increase. This projected growth increases the likelihood that social workers will experience an influx of diverse populations within their practices and workplace settings.

Implications of the Increases in Immigrant Populations to the U.S.
The immigrant populations entering the U.S. represent a wide variety and range of backgrounds: some may be from regions with high rates of poverty; some have experienced the tragedies of terror, genocide, and war; some speak another language other than...
English, while others are predominately people of color who encounter mistrusted biases and discrimination. The nation’s intention to accept various groups’ cultural and racial differences is often overshadowed by racial intolerance, mistrust, misunderstanding, and misconceptions about religion, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. This dynamic has evolved into a mixed societal and political reaction to multiculturalism that ranges from sustained negativity towards diversity to welcoming and appreciating the contributions these differences can make to this country. Too often, however, these multicultural populations confront barriers and access to services because of their limited English proficiency (LEP). Increasingly, with demographic changes in people, families and communities, multiculturalism is an ideal that must be realized within the framework of social work practice and attitudes.

Multiculturalism in Context

Throughout the early history of the U.S., multiculturalism concepts were often negatively viewed, as illustrated by the exploitation of Native Americans, forcible enslavement of Africans brought to this country, and subsequently with the later arrival of immigrant populations (Lee, E & McKeen, R. 2008b). During the Civil Rights movement, however, racial and economic inequities were core factors that advanced multiculturalism approaches towards the recognition and valuing of diversity.

Multiculturalism is defined “as an ideology that suggests that society should consist of, or at least recognize and include with equal status, diverse cultural groups” (Sue, 2006). The NASW Code of Ethics provides guidance to social workers regarding their work with multicultural individuals, families and communities by identifying core values, principles, and standards that supports work with diverse clients and communities.

Social Workers and a Multiculturalism Approach

Teaching and learning from a multicultural perspective increases knowledge, awareness and understanding about race, ethnicity, gender, and immigrant populations, and is likely to contribute to culturally competent social work practice. With the continuous growth of numbers of culturally diverse individuals and groups of people, social workers will be challenged in their ability to meet the multicultural needs of a diverse society. Cultural competence considerations included in multicultural practice include:

- Social workers need to be aware of their own values and biases.
- Social workers need to be aware of the client’s world view.
- Social worker need to be able to deliver culturally appropriate interventions.

In order for social workers to provide culturally informed services, they must integrate their attitudes, knowledge, and skills into practice. (Kohli, H, Huber, R, Faul, A., 2010). In an advocacy capacity, social workers can be essential to responding to and facilitating the cooperation in-between mainstream sociocultural attitudes and the populations seeking acceptance and recognition.

Social Work Ethics and Multiculturalism

Three standards are identified under section 1.05 Cultural Competence and Social Diversity of the NASW Code of Ethics and they include:

- Social workers should understand culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures.
- Social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients’ culture and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients’ cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups.

Social workers need to recognize some common barriers to and areas in the delivery of culturally competent services such as:

- Evaluation and practices that do not consider culture, religion and secularism can increase the likelihood of inadequate and possible ill considered treatment interventions and services.
- Consideration of possible cultural attitudes in seeking treatment.
- An unprepared social-work workforce.

Self-Assessment Tool for Cultural Competence:

A starting point for social workers can be to use a simple cultural competence self-assessment tool. The questions can help social workers probe into their own personal thoughts, biases, and agencies barriers in delivering culturally competent services to multicultural population groups. Self assessment is often seen as a way for personnel and organizations to enhance and improve agency services and ultimately measurable outcomes.

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Social workers will need to avoid the misconception that one intervention fits all as well as failing to integrate the role and influence of culture into services and interventions.

References


Resources


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