HOW CULTURAL AWARENESS WORKS

Miu Chung Yan is an associate professor of the School of Social Work, the University of British Columbia, the Acting Co-Director and a Domain Leader of Metropolis British Columbia. His research interests include youth from immigrant family, immigrant settlement and integration at the neighbourhood-level, and critical social work practice with multicultural/racial groups.

ABSTRACT

Working with multicultural groups poses routine challenges for many mental health professionals in Canada. This article reports on a study of 30 frontline social workers and how they reflect on their own cultures when working cross-culturally. The strategies used are identified and analyzed.

INTRODUCTION

Working with a culturally diverse population is an everyday reality for many helping professionals in the Canadian mental health field. To negotiate the ingrained effect of their own culture and to respect their clients' cultural differences, culturally competent helping professionals are expected to maintain a high level of cultural awareness, which means a *self-awareness* of their own cultural background. In the literature related to many helping professions, the discussion on cultural awareness tends to simplify the relationship between the helping professionals and their own cultures to a mere filtering process through which the influence of their cultures can be controlled, or even blocked, from affecting their engagement with clients from different cultures. Through pre- and post-intervention self-reflection, helping professionals are assumed to have the ability to sustain their professional objectivity by restraining their own cultural influences when they engage in a professional relationship with clients from different cultures. However, this assumption has seldom been examined empirically. Based on the findings of an exploratory qualitative study, this article reports how 30 social workers in the Metropolitan Toronto area, different in terms of gender, age, ethno-racial identity, length of time practicing social work, nature of practice, and service settings, engaged in cultural awareness in the practice as social workers. Since social work is a key helping profession in the mental health field, findings of this study may shed light on how other helping professionals engage in cultural awareness when working with a culturally diverse population.

FINDINGS

Most of the participants in this study understood culture as a totalized and encompassing entity that includes ways of life, ways of coping, beliefs, values, norms, practice, rites, customs and traditions, religion, expectations of others, language, and food and dress. The encompassing nature of culture is particularly demonstrated when many of the participants move their definition of culture beyond ethnicity and race. As indicated in the lived experiences of these participants, the complexity of these concepts is manifested as intermingled sets of characteristics of their "cultural background." As the interview process revealed, most of the participants identified themselves in a way that conflated culture, ethnicity, and race (Yan, 2008b).

The cultural identity of each of these 30 participants is complex. First, the majority of them tended to identify as a hyphenated ethno-cultural identity, such as Portuguese-Canadian, which carries a set of different ethnic cultures. This hyphenated identity is also intertwined with their own personal experiences, such as being an immigrant or being member of a marginalized group. Furthermore, their role as professionals working in a public institution also required them to be reflective on the professional and socio-organizational cultures that are in tension with both their own and their clients' cultures (Yan, 2008a). In a nutshell, the cultures on which these participants need to reflect are never monolithic and simple.

Most participants reported that they constantly engage in self-awareness when they work with culturally diverse clients in order to avoid bringing their biases into the helping process. Simply put, to almost all of the participants, awareness of their own cultures augments their professional competence to maintain a balance between preserving a non-judgmental attitude and presenting themselves as passionate human beings. However, the all-encompassing nature of culture prompts some people to suggest that culture to humans is like water to fish; people do not and cannot exist outside of their cultural contexts. Very often we live within our culture without knowing its existence and influence. Then, the question is, what triggers the professional's reflection? The findings of this study strongly suggest that the *presence of clients* is the most

important factor. The cultural similarities or differences between the workers and their clients, as indicated in this study, are the major contextual variables that influence the workers' reflection on their own cultures.

The findings of this study indicate that reflection is not simply a retrospection about what they did but also a strategic action of helping. At least two sets of strategic actions can be identified conceptually from the findings; these two sets are not mutually exclusive, and the choice of strategies may not be a conscious act.

CONTROLLING CULTURES

To control the influence of their cultures on their work which is a relatively common reaction when working with clients from a different cultural background, these participants try to withhold the influences of their non-professional cultural identities and the sets of cultures and experiences attached to these identities. The participants presented at least six ways of controlling their cultural influences.

1. DETACHING ONESELF FROM ONE'S OWN CULTURE

To be professional, many participants have to detach their ethnic/racial identity from their professional role, sometimes even when their ethnic/racial identity is under attack. In fact, unlike the Caucasian participants, most of the racial minority participants have experienced being rejected by their Caucasian clients. Surprisingly, almost none of them reported being involved in any direct confrontation as a result of these kinds of racial attacks. Instead, several visible minority participants reported that, on hearing their clients criticize people from the participants' own racial/ethnic background, they tried to detach themselves from the clients' racist criticism, or like one participant noted, *"So when I hear this thing, I will be very conscious to separate this, [as this] is a client talking about his or her experience, it is not about you although this is a situation that requires challenging."*

2. SEPARATE LIFE DOMAINS

Many participants try to keep their work and non-work life domains separated, especially when they are not fully coherent with each other. Most minority participants are eager to keep their cultural roots at home while they try to adapt to the dominant culture at work. The underlying assumption of separating life domains is literally that culture can be controlled. As a Black social worker in Children's Aid stated, *"Work might be a little different from home because home tends to be more typical. The home culture, that is your own home.... but coming to work, I leave a little bit at home and take more of the Canadian norms to work. Yes, so it's partly different. I might do things at home that I might not do at the office."*

3. SWITCHING HATS

Having a multiple cultural identity, many of the participants report that they are wearing more than one cultural hat to work. At work, they have to switch their non-professional cultural hat to their professional one by endorsing the culture embedded in this identity. In the meantime, by switching hats, their own cultures and experiences are contained, if not at home, at least during the moment of working with a client. To many participants, this may be necessary to maintain the balance between the professional and personal selves. As a Chilean-Canadian worker employed in a hospital observes, *"Well, I think every social worker has to, at one level or another, separate them[selves] professionally. And personally we will hear a story and get pissed off."*

4. SELECTIVE PRESENTATION OF SELF

Most participants tend to think that with experience and good skills, they can be competent social workers who transcend cultural barriers. They also believe that, from a client's perspective, whether a worker is competent depends on how well he/she can help the client. Therefore, selectively presenting themselves as competent helpers to their clients becomes a major way to control their cultural image. As an Iranian-Canadian working in a mental health clinic reported, *"I certainly try to project myself as a person who is professional about my job. I am maintaining appropriate boundaries. [I am] somebody who is competent, reliable... that's how I want them to see me."*

5. ASSUMING THE "WHITE" IDENTITY

Regardless of their ethno-racial background, participants of this study tend to point out, one way or another, that the "Whiteness" image—that of a mainstream worker—is perceived as the standard by which they (and their clients) measure their level of competence. This sense of "Whiteness," according to many participants, is embedded in their training, their practice setting, and the nature of the profession. Therefore, to be seen as competent in this profession, even minority workers must, insofar as it is possible, take on a "White" identity. Linda, a Chinese-Canadian who works in a children's mental health agency, explains her reasons for assuming this "White" identity:

> *For me, as a minority therapist, I face double challenges. When I work with minority people, I have my counter-transference towards them too because I am also a minority. I also don't want them to see me as powerless, weak. To be seen as small, weak and helpless, right? So there is a counter-transference part from my position. When I see White*

people,... I will identify with the aggressor, so I would want to join them.... And I think I also want to prove to my colleagues, I can do the same work as them. It's not a conscious choice, though.

6. RETROSPECTION

Despite all the strategies that the participants used to control or restrain their culture from intervening in their work, cultures and experiences may still slip into their interactions with clients without prompting the workers to engage the self-awareness mechanism. For instance, a Chilean-Canadian working in a hospital remembered a time that she was unconsciously critical of a daughter who intended to abandon her mother, a patient in her hospital. In the worker's own non-professional cultural practice, such abandonment by a daughter was unacceptable. Instead of becoming cognizant of her feelings at the time, however, and consequently working to control or contain these feelings, she condemned the daughter for her intentions. In cross-cultural social work literature, retrospection, a form of anecdotal self-awareness, is an expected practice for social workers. By deliberate retrospection through recording, peer consultation, and clinical supervision, social workers will try to catch those cultural influences that escaped into their practice. Remedies will be sought afterward.

USING CULTURES

According to the findings of this study, in addition to controlling or containing their cultures, almost all participants consciously and purposefully use their own cultures and experiences as means of helping clients, especially those who share similar cultural backgrounds or experiences with them. In general, three major strategies of "using" cultures can be identified.

1. EMPATHETIC UNDERSTANDING BASED ON SIMILARITY

Workers can often build a more effective working relationship through an empathetic understanding with clients who share similar cultures and experiences. Based on cultural or experiential similarities, many participants felt that they may have an added intimate dimension in interacting with their clients. For instance, many Caucasian participants always referred to their traveling experience when trying to understand clients from countries which they visited. Sharing similar immigration experiences, as many participants have been immigrants themselves, allows them to establish special rapport with immigrant clients. Many participants felt that having a similar cultural and experiential background to their clients helped them to go to a deeper level to understand clients' problems and thus establish a closer relationship with them.

2. THERAPEUTIC SELF-DISCLOSURE

Self-disclosure is another technique through which participants used personal experience to assist clients. Most minority participants reported that clients are especially interested in asking them questions related to their cultural identities in order to verify whether the workers are capable of helping them. In a worker's cross-cultural engagement with a client, disclosing some parts of the worker's personal experience and culture is useful for helping the clients. These participants disclose their own cultural information in order to make a connection with, empower, and gain trust from their clients. Nevertheless, not all of the social worker's culture and personal experience is subject to disclosure. To many participants, disclosing is a purposeful and selective strategy. A boundary needs to be set between what can and cannot be shared. As one participant observed, *"Is it for the benefit for yourself? Is it for the benefit of your client? Be really mindful about when you use self-disclosure within your therapy. I think about that often and how that relates to boundar[ies]."*

3. BRIDGING CLIENTS TO THE DOMINANT CULTURE

Many minority participants, particularly those who have been immigrants, will use their cultural and experiential knowledge to help their clients adapt to a new culture they themselves have successfully acclimated to. A newcomer from Africa working in child protection services offered a vivid illustration of how he helped an African family who had struggled with the child protection agency for a few years to reclaim their child. By using his own experience, he taught them how to understand and adjust to the cultural expectations of the dominant society. In this way, social workers who use their own stories to bridge clients to a new culture also become agents of social integration.

DISCUSSION

These findings show that cultural awareness occurs before, during, and after the intervention, and that social workers may engage with their cultures in multiple ways as a strategy of helping. Blocking one's own culture, the course most often proposed by the literature, involves a series of strategic actions. The findings also indicate that these 30 social workers, and perhaps other helping professionals, have been strategically utilizing their own cultures and experiences as a part of the cultural awareness process. This strategic use of one's own culture challenges the conventional assumption that cultures are always biased and therefore need to be contained. Using one's culture in a professional capacity creates possibilities that allow for a more creative and proactive approach to working with culturally different clients. This study helps

to confirm that many social workers and other helping professionals categorize "being culturally aware" as a responsible professional act that facilitates effective service for culturally different clients.

However, the findings also raise some issues that need further study and discussion. The conflation of culture, race, and ethnicity has distracted attention away from some structural problems in the helping relationship and process. The inseparableness of culture, ethnicity, and race in their stories, their detachment from their own ethno-racial identity even as their clients attack people of that identity, and their justification for being rejected by Caucasian clients, to name but a few examples, demonstrate that many of these participants try to avoid challenging the racially oppressive conditions in which they and their clients are located. Even with an active and strategic reflection on their cultures, without critically examining "Whiteness" as a measure of professional competence, many visible minority social workers and clients are still struggling to fit in a culturally biased mode of helping.

This study affirms that cultural awareness is an interactive, selective, and contingent process. Perhaps the key to meaningful cultural awareness is the dialogical understanding of oneself (Yan & Wong, 2005). As noted in this study, this dialogical process is affected by the similarities and differences between the workers and their clients, which are not only cultural but also structural, in terms of their social positions (e.g., race, gender, and class) and the context in which the workers and their clients are located. Social workers therefore need to *reflexively* reflect not only on their cultures but also on the invisible privileges embedded in their social positions. Finally, this study offers only a preliminary understanding of how some social workers practice cultural awareness. To better understand this complex process and its significance in social work practice, more studies are needed.

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FOOTNOTES

This article is an abbreviated version of a published manuscript. For a full version of this paper, please refer to Yan, M. C. (2005). How cultural awareness works: An empirical examination of the interaction between social workers and their clients. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 22(1), 5-29.