

International Literature Project Series

Preparing Social Work Students to Practice in An Interconnected World

LEARNING INTERCULTURAL SKILLS: INTERCULTURAL SERVICE PROVISION (Annotated)

Practicing Cultural Responsiveness With Actions: Interculturality as Social Equity

Selected Scholarly Articles

The following curated selection of 15 annotated studies, including conceptual articles, introduces action-oriented approaches to intercultural practice in social service provision that seek to promote social equity. They represent approaches to cross-cultural practice from across the world, and each includes background on the region's unique social-political-historical-cultural context. The selections are intended to be illustrative, not comprehensive or globally representative. How might these varied worldviews inform our own social work practice?

The studies are grouped according to the following themes (2-3 studies per section):

1. *What really matters to clients of different cultural backgrounds*
2. *Cultural understanding is about cow jai: cow, entering into, jai—the heart of another*
3. *The elements of intercultural competence articulated*
4. *Developing intercultural awareness through intercultural collaboration*
5. *Interculturality as co-construction*
6. *The social construction of “us” and “them”—How a focus on culture can detract from real issues*

1. What really matters to clients of different cultural backgrounds

Denmark

“What can we learn from unaccompanied refugee adolescents' perspectives on mental health care in exile?”
Frederikke Jarlby, Simone Goosen, Ilse Derluyn, Kathrine Vitus, Signe Smith Jervelund
European Journal of Pediatrics, Volume 177, 2018, Pages 1767-1774

To link this article: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00431-018-3249-0>

This mixed methods study of unaccompanied refugee adolescents in Denmark sought to examine what is important to them regarding their mental health care. In their view, their mental health can be promoted by social support in their daily lives. Of great importance to the adolescents were shared activities with the professionals, e.g., music, painting, laughing, walking or eating, which they “associated with being met as fellow human beings and included feeling understood.” The youths found conversational therapy focusing on past traumatic events meaningless and inadequate in improving their mental health. There was a sense “that it is not only important to acquire intercultural competency understood as a technical skill but also that providers of mental healthcare are self-reflective and receptive towards the refugee adolescents’ points of view including individual, social and cultural dispositions (habitus [the way a person of a particular background perceives and reacts to the world]).”

United States

"Intercultural knowledge and skills in social service work with refugees"

Amy Phillips

Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research, Volume 3, 2009, Pages 185-195

To link to article, click "Abstracts from previous volumes" at: <https://www.jeqr.org/>

A comparative study of how refugees, social service providers, and stakeholder in a U.S. city described the intercultural knowledge and skills necessary for effective work with refugees. The stakeholders were human service providers working in noncounty human service agencies. Findings juxtaposed refugee emphasis on the need for providers to "be human" with county service providers' reliance on program rules, personal values, and expectations for refugee assimilation into dominant American norms, values, and community networks. Stakeholders stressed that effective work involves intentional cultural learning, reflection, relationship building, and action based on new knowledge. Refugees indicated their integration would be less traumatic if agency providers developed a deeper understanding of their cultures and backgrounds but also their experiences as refugees. They had a desire for them to support their own adjustment pace and emotional needs. According to a refugee respondent, a good provider is "one who really, as a human, put yourself in the other person's shoes.... The first thing that you need is the worker, the social worker. The first person that you feel that you want to cry on your shoulder and you want to tell whatever pain that you have. And if that person is not polite enough to understand, it's not worth it."

United States

"What is patient-centered care really? Voices of Hispanic prenatal patients"

Alicia A. Bergman, Stacey L. Connaughton

Volume 28, Issue 8, 2013, Pages 789-799

To link this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2012.725124>

In healthcare provision, cross-cultural practice is a key element conceptualized as part of patient-centered care (PCC). In this qualitative study, Hispanic patients at a health clinic were asked, "Please describe for me what 'patient-centered care' means to you," followed, when needed, with the additional probe, "Please describe for me the characteristics of an ideal provider." The themes that emerged reflected several different assumptions and expectations with regard to patient-centered care compared to those promoted in PCC frameworks, such as the extent to which friendly interpersonal behaviors (e.g., smiling, making eye contact, displaying patience, and engaging in formal greetings, introductions, and farewells) were critical to patient satisfaction with the health care experience. Not only did patients feel better understood, but accompanied by friendly behaviors, information was viewed as more believable and accurate, and thus more patient-centered. While effective care, the use of Spanish, understandable information delivery, and the absence of racism were also themes that emerged, it was the display of friendly communicative behaviors that was the most commonly mentioned by respondents. Respondents responses included not only medical staff, but a range of health care providers.

Netherlands

"Social workers' contribution to success in lives of young Moroccan-Dutch"

Youssef Azghari, Fons J. R. van de Vijver, Erna Hooghiemstra

European Journal of Social Work, Volume 23, Issue 1, 2020, Pages 156-172

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1469470>

The first part of this two-part study examined the role Dutch professionals can play to improve the social participation of new immigrant generations (second and third generations) of Moroccan-Dutch in the Netherlands. Social participation is defined here as school completion, employment, satisfaction with social position, and lack of involvement in illegal activities. An aim of the study was to increase the understanding of how to assist migrants to overcome participation barriers. In terms of professional skills to help this community achieve successful social participation, social workers pointed to the following: give positive feedback and accept who they are, listen and ask what they want, be present and prevent problems, motivate, and be authentic.

2. Cultural understanding is about *cow jai*: *cow*, entering into, *jai*—the heart of another *

Thailand

"Understanding and misunderstanding in cross-cultural practice: Further conversations with Suwanrang"
Catherine Nye

Clinical Social Work Journal, Volume 34, 2006, Pages 303-317

To link this article: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10615-005-0016-2>

*I draw the wording for the subheading above from this article, "the Thai words for understanding, *cow jai*, mean literally *cow*—entering into, as one would enter a room, *jai*—the heart of another." This article illustrates the process of cultural understanding by examining cultural differences vis-à-vis a western model in the experience and communication of affect using clinical examples from Northern Thailand. The article illustrates the ways subtle and complex differences in clients' affective worlds challenge our capacity to understand those who are culturally different. The author (Catherine Nye) writes based on her clinical observations as a Fulbright Scholar in Northern Thailand while working with Suwanrang Dansawan, a medical social worker at Suan Dok Hospital in Chiang Mai. Nye presents detailed reflections on her observation of Dansawan's session with the parents of a teen who has become pregnant. Nye's misunderstandings of the clients' affect and the social worker's responses were clarified by Dansawan's explanation of what the problem at hand represented to the family in the context of Thai culture. A cultural disconnect in communication patterns and emotional restraint or expression also emerged. The author suggests that, "in the absence of a common ground of shared cultural assumptions to fall back on,... we must accept these experiences, recognize them as important, potentially valuable moments in cross-cultural practice and learn to use them to deepen our understanding and appreciation of cultural difference." Nye reminds us that cross-cultural misunderstanding will happen, despite our best efforts, but ultimately, she says, "such moments can—and often do—lead to firmer connections and better understanding."

Italy

"Diversity and equality in social work: A qualitative study in Italy"

Mara Sanfelici

European Journal of Social Work, Volume 24, Issue 2, 2021, Pages 267-277

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2019.1646215>

By exploring the reasoning that orients social worker encounters with clients from different cultural backgrounds, this Italian study adds a layer of complexity to intercultural service provision. The results reveal important variations within individual accounts and different rationales provided to make sense of equality and the social worker's role in approaching cultural differences. According to the author

“some professionals seem to place more emphasis on standardisation, fitting clients into available categories or taken for granted assumptions, not giving priority to accounting for cultural differences. Other social workers stress the importance of a dialogical and iterative process, in which the emphasis is on respecting and valuing diversity.” Professional approaches may be influenced by models of practice: (a) a model in which the social worker is the expert on the problem and the possible solutions, (b) the worker is mainly the expert of procedure and eligibility for service, or (c) the client is assumed as the expert of their own problems and both the worker and the client are agents of change. These allow for different levels of client’s participation in the helping process and different levels of interaction with the client perspective.

3. The elements of intercultural competence articulated

Sweden

“Intercultural competencies as a means to manage intercultural interactions in social work”

Jonas Stier

Journal of Intercultural Communication, Issue 7, 2004, Pages 1-17

To link to this article: <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/abstracts/stier-abs.htm>

In this conceptual article, the author analyzes how social work needs to prepare for Sweden’s increasingly multicultural society. Based on social scientific discourse, the author proposes that in addition to *content-competencies* (knowing that), which focuses on understanding how people from other cultures think and act, *process competencies* (knowing how) are required. Process competencies are needed because “every social interaction is unique and must be seen in the light of the involved actors’ backgrounds and situational characteristics.” Social workers need to possess (a) interactional competencies: noticing, analyzing and understanding cultural differences and peculiarities, including how clients may perceive a given situation, while valuing clients unconditionally, (b) cognitive competencies: putting oneself in the position of the other; understanding *externally* by making use of information and communication, understanding *internally* by empathizing and identifying with the client; viewing oneself in the eyes of others; alternating between different professional roles (e.g., encourager, informer); and trying to understand the client in the light of their life-situation, (c) emotive competencies: being aware of and preventing emotional responses from *automatically* influencing professional performance, simultaneously being a fellow human being and a public representative by operating within existing laws and ethical principles, and (d) discourse awareness: being cognizant of the discourse on cultural differences, including the political discourse and media coverage on things like “migration-related” problems and the pathologization of the entire and significant portion of the population that immigrants constitute, and remaining cautious of how can influence interactions with clients.

Canada

“Intercultural understanding and pedagogy of empathy: A cultural experiential learning from an interdisciplinary dialogue project”

Somnoma Valerie Ouedraogo

Journal of Intercultural Studies, Volume 42, Issue 3, 2021, Pages 317-331

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2021.1930726>

This Canadian article approaches intercultural social work practice as “a pedagogy of empathy.” According to the author, “social work practice embedded within a pedagogy of empathy involves cultivating knowledge and information-gathering skills that help social work professionals to empathetically respond to, negotiate, and manage intercultural encounters.” Applying Manassis’ (2017) four steps of empathy pedagogy the article illustrates how empathy can be applied to the teaching and learning process of social workers with the aim of enhancing intercultural knowledge, skills, and abilities. These four steps of empathy pedagogy are: (1) attending to the moment, (2) directing attention toward other, (3) focusing on other people to understand their thoughts and feelings, and (4) communicating our understanding of the other person’s experience to them with the hope that they will feel understood. The article describes the implementation of this approach with students participating in a course titled Intercultural Practice in Social Work (see [Interdisciplinary Dialogue Proceedings](#) for class notes and student publications).

4. Developing intercultural awareness through intercultural collaboration

South Africa

“Making music together: A transdisciplinary approach towards the development of intercultural awareness”

Marichen van der Westhuizen, Thomas Greuel

Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa, Volume 18, Issue 1, 2021, Pages 39–57

To link this article: <https://doi.org/10.2989/18121004.2021.2020965>

This paper reports on four research studies in South Africa that investigated how social work and the arts together can explore ways to facilitate contact between diverse groups in the context of the influence of the past—the segregation laws of the apartheid years that had an impact on contacts and interactions between cultural groups still evident in present-day South African society. The aim of these studies which involved a project where a South African and a German group of student social workers joined each other in South Africa was to create an opportunity to develop intercultural awareness through joint music-making in an attempt to address prejudice and intolerance. According to the article, making music together “contributes towards achieving the aim of relationship-building and social change...[and] requires cooperation where participants learn to communicate and listen.” Among many other dimensions, social work students noted the lack of superiority, a sense of equality in the experience, “We had a common goal. I never got the feeling that we are trying to compete. We all participated in our own special way.... We did not understand each other’s language, but when we made music you could really understand what someone is trying to say.”

United States

“Employing Mexican American folklore as an educational tool to teach cultural competence”

Leyla Feize, Denise A. Longoria, Alfredo Fernandez

Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, Volume 20, 2019, Pages 262-277

To link to article: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Employing-Mexican-American-Folklore-as-an-Tool-to-Feize-Longoria/c2023ab06c1b124296c430c7940cfa220415e1b9>

This U.S. article reports on a study on teaching and learning intercultural competence to assist social work students in providing effective social services to the Mexican American population. This approach “attempts to give a voice to Mexican American social work students and to allow them to explore their culture, obtain a deep understanding of their own cultural elements, and learn how to utilize constructive

cultural factors in practicing social work.” The authors conducted a study of Mexican American students’ cultural explorations and learning using an activity which involved them asking elderly adults, mostly their relatives, to tell them unwritten folklore in Spanish and then providing their reflections and interpretations. Students indicated that this project helped them learn more about their culture and helped them realize that culture has an essential role in people’s lives and becomes a lens through which they shape and interpret the reality of their environment. The students expressed that they will be more careful and sensitive when they work with clients from different cultures.

5. Interculturality as co-construction

Australia

“Cultural responsiveness in action: Co-constructing social work curriculum resources with Aboriginal communities”

Bindi Bennett, Helen Redfern, Joanna Zubrzycki

The British Journal of Social Work, Volume 48, Issue 3, 2018, Pages 808–825

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx053>

This article describes the co-construction of social work curriculum resources with Aboriginal communities in Australia. In 2012, the Australian Association of Social Workers, the accrediting body for all Australian social work degrees, developed curriculum guidelines which require that “the ways of knowing, being and doing” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders [the two cultural groups that comprise Australia’s Indigenous peoples] be taught in social work degrees. The article cites research that shows that although the Australian social work curriculum generally incorporates knowledge about the history and impacts of colonization, it does not provide students with guidance about *how to apply Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing into practice*. Two filmed case studies and companion learning and teaching guides were co-constructed by an Aboriginal filmmaker and production company and a team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social work academic staff at one Australian university. This involved a consultation process with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and with the university’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Units as well as the creation of a collaborative space in which Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people brought together diverse perspectives. In total, 122 individuals and organizations participated in the project consultations. These included Aboriginal Elders, social workers, community members, students and academics. Non-Indigenous academic colleagues, social workers and students also provided input into the design of the resources.

Chile

- “Strangers in their own world: Exploring the relation between cultural practices and the health of older adults in Native communities in Chile”

Lorena P Gallardo-Peralta, Esteban Sánchez-Moreno, Vicente Rodríguez-Rodríguez

The British Journal of Social Work, Volume 49, Issue 4, 2019, Pages 920–942

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz045>

- “Intercultural health: Chile’s path towards recognizing Indigenous health sovereignty”

Interview with Calfin Lafkenche, Desarrollo Intercultural Chile

Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine, Volume 44, Issue 2, 2020

The focus of intercultural service provision in this double source from Chile is on health provision to Chilean Indigenous communities. In the first article, "Strangers in their own world," based on their research findings that maintaining Indigenous medical practices are related with better health, the authors suggest the need to incorporate an Indigenous perspective into social work practice. They call for "designing interventions and policies that help to maintain and perpetuate Indigenous health practices in community spaces." The second article, "Intercultural health," describes an existing collaboration in Chile between intercultural health systems involving Indigenous and state healthcare. The state has facilitated intercultural health learning for professionals: western health officials are trained in Indigenous health practices and do internships in Indigenous villages. People from Indigenous communities are able to access internships in hospitals or universities. Western health and traditional health practitioners work together and recognize each other's contributions to the health of the community.

6. The social construction of "us" and "them"—How a focus on culture can detract from real issues

Sweden

- "Social work beyond cultural otherisation"
Jessica H. Jönsson
Nordic Social Work Research, Volume 2, 2013, Pages 159-167
To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2013.834510>
- "Constructing cultural Otherness within the Swedish welfare state: The cases of social workers in Sweden"
Qualitative Social Work, Volume 14, Issue 4, 2015, Pages 554–571
Barzoo Eliassi
To link to this article:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278913245_Constructing_cultural_Otherness_within_the_Swedish_welfare_state_The_cases_of_social_workers_in_Sweden

These two articles written from a Swedish perspective caution social work of the challenge of cultural "otherisation." In the first, a conceptual article, Jessica H. Jönsson considers how a focus on the cultures of marginalized groups detracts from the real issues facing these communities. Culture, she argues, has become "an analytical instrument for understanding marginalised people and their problems." She notes that "social problems of people with immigrant backgrounds [are] 'culturalised' and made different from 'our social problems'.... The culturalisation of social problems often hides a critical discussion of the structural and institutional mechanisms behind marginalisation and social problems which are developed at the intersections of class, ethnicity and gender among other power relations in society and at the global level." The second article, "Otherness within the Swedish welfare state: The cases of social workers in Sweden," reveals evidence that social services reproduce these dynamics. Based on a qualitative study, Barzoo Eliassi finds that social workers working in immigrant communities not only see cultural differences but also regard these differences as central when they frame, assess, and formulate their interventions. An over-reliance on culture to explain the behavior of immigrant clients is decontextualized to exclude other important factors such as poverty, unemployment, housing conditions, social isolation, and ethnic discrimination. The author cautions that this establishes a cultural hierarchy that reinforces existing power inequalities since immigrants are not allowed to enjoy their full citizenship.