Cross-Cultural Social Work: Local and global

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The idea for this book originated in 2009 when How Kee from the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) was on sabbatical leave in Australia at RMIT University and the University of Queensland. From discussions with social work colleagues in Malaysia, Australia and Singapore it soon became apparent that a book on cross-cultural social work would fill a major gap in the literature by providing a much-needed focus on cross-cultural and Indigenous issues in the Asia-Pacific region. Sincere thanks to the many people who have supported us along the journey in writing this book and, in particular, all of the contributing authors for their unwavering commitment. Thanks to our reviewers Linda Briskman, Leon Fulcher, Donna McDonald, Gill Raja and Colin Smith for their thoughtful and candid feedback. We are appreciative of the enthusiasm and support for the idea of the book from our three universities (UNIMAS, RMIT and the National University of Singapore), and Elizabeth Vella from Palgrave who has encouraged and guided us throughout the writing process. We are grateful for the skillful editorial assistance provided by Gillian Smith and Ingrid Bond, and the formatting of the draft manuscript by Russell Tien.

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Foreword

The themes of cross-cultural social work practice, research and curriculum policy are central and enduring facets of social work debate on a global level. No matter what the country context, the issues associated with formulating sound methodologies of practice and an appropriate response to cultural diversity are firmly on the agenda. While acknowledgment of this fact is undisputed, what is more contested are the very formulas, discourses, models and methods proposed at different times and in different places. Yet the strength of this debate is itself a strength of social work. The profession's willingness to debate, cogitate, critique, propose and draw from emergent theory in practice signals not simply the complexities of the terrain it seeks to navigate but also the ongoing development of theory and practice.

Cross-Cultural Social Work: Local and global makes a significant contribution to this endeavour. The range and depth of the theoretical debate, the international reach of the dialogue and the number of practice fields drawn upon to illustrate various dimensions of this debate together make this text both unique and important. The contributions span the Asia-Pacific region and accordingly reflect some of the live issues in this context, including indigeneity and indigenous knowledges, social entrepreneurship, migrant settlement, international adoption, and culturally sensitive palliative care. This text is, however, wholly global in as much as these issues are engaged with in order to provide lessons for places elsewhere. Theories and perspectives on working with cultural diversity are critically evaluated, reconceptualised and applied in interesting and illustrative ways using case studies and worked examples. The underlying principle that culture is not static, that it is historically and socially contextualised and that it is subject to the intersectionalities of age, gender, socioeconomic status, time and other factors is sustained throughout the text to its credit.

Perhaps the strongest thematic thread of the book, however, is in terms of what it demands of the profession itself. This is a text that speaks to students, to educators, to practitioners and to those involved in the delivery of services, challenging them to reorient their focus away from the dominant paradigm of 'us' (dominant majority)
working with ‘them’ (minority cultures) to one in which they are able to enter into the fluidity of this terrain and grapple with competing knowledges, engage with and celebrate diversity, and critically reflect on their own positioning within this dialectic.

This text brings together the distinguished and authoritative voice of scholars in the region and makes a unique contribution to a literature that has hitherto been dominated by North America, the UK and Europe. It provides a rich picture of the complexities of practice and lays down usable knowledges for students, practitioners and those who teach about service delivery.

Professor Charlotte Williams OBE
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Charlotte Williams is Professor and Head of Social Work at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. In 2007 she was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services to ethnic minorities and equal opportunities. Her engagement with minoritised groups is aimed at capacity release and sustainability. She is a member of the TISSA International Steering Committee, an international network of universities that seeks to enhance and promote international scientific and professional discourse about social work.
Introducing cross-cultural social work: local and global

Ling How Kee, Jennifer Martin and Rosaleen Ow

Social work is now a global profession. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) has member organisations from 90 countries across the globe. However, despite increased interdependence and globalisation, the questions of appropriate models and methods of social work practice continue to confront practitioners and educators worldwide.

In a similar way, cultural diversity is at the forefront of social work practice within and across countries. Increasingly, social workers in different countries have to relate to multicultural societies and develop culturally relevant and appropriate practices with individuals, families, groups and communities. In addition, social workers are working more across different national boundaries or with issues that emanate from forces both within and beyond the countries they are from. Social work education therefore has to prepare graduates to work in varying cultural and socioeconomic contexts locally and globally.

*Cross-cultural Social Work: Local and global* is intended to meet the growing needs of social work students, practitioners and educators in a variety of contexts in the arena of international social work practice and in cross-cultural social work. Chapters are included on social work in non-Western countries; social work with immigrants and ethnic minorities from non-Western backgrounds residing in Western countries; social work with Indigenous communities; and issues for social workers working with people from a culture different from their own. The countries represented in this book are in the Asia-Pacific region: Australia, India, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand and Hawaii. The writings are, however, from a global perspective and yet, at other times, are distinctively local.

Social work education curriculum in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including Australia, has to incorporate in its content cross-cultural practice as well
as standards of practice with minority communities, as stipulated by professional accreditation bodies such as the Australian Association of Social Workers. However, teaching materials in this topic area have not moved in tandem with this new development. Much of the existing literature is from United Kingdom and North America. This book endeavours to contribute to the knowledge and skills much needed in this region.

This book places culture on the centre stage of social work practice; in doing so, it engages the reader to critically reflect on cultural underpinnings of dominant social work theories and methods and to challenge the way we think about culture and cross-cultural practice. It differs from other competing titles in that it offers a rethinking of cross-cultural practice beyond adapting practices by social workers from dominant cultures when working with minority cultures, to orientating social workers to be able to think and work in the many cultures of the world.

Each chapter provides a critical understanding of the complex issues and themes related to cross-cultural social work practice. Combining theoretical discussions and practical knowledge-building materials, interspersed with illustrative case examples from different practice settings and countries, each chapter aims to facilitate the development of cultural competency in social work students and educators, practitioners and researchers.

A distinctive feature of this book is that much of the writings are drawn from the insightful knowledge and recent research of social work educators and practitioners who themselves have lived experiences of grappling with being in different cultures in which their majority or minority position is fluid: in one culture, they may be in the majority, but in another they are part of a minority. This offers the reader refreshing recounts of lessons learned from the field, while at the same time addresses profound issues confronting social workers in different practice areas in which culture cannot be ignored.

A main theme throughout the book is the celebration of different understandings within and between cultures. This acknowledges the fluidity of culture in terms of factors that impact upon individual experiences such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, time and reasons for migration, and so forth. The contributions of different cultures to the fabric of society are highlighted and suggestions are provided for how service needs can be best met by collaboration between mainstream health and ethno-specific health and welfare service providers. It is acknowledged that there remains a place for ethno-specific services and the importance of tailoring all services to cultural needs.

Structure of the book

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 discusses the theories and perspectives of culturally appropriate social work theory and practice, as well as education and research. Chapter 2 explores major discourses on developing culturally appropriate
practice theory and approaches in various countries or cultures in the past few decades. It identifies authentisation, Indigenous social work, cultural knowledge, cultural awareness and power analysis as complementary approaches to social work engaging with cultural diversity. The second part of the chapter takes the reader through a critical discussion of the much taken-for-granted concept of culture and explores how differing understandings of the concept may have impacted on the way culturally appropriate social work practice is conceptualised and developed. We then recast our gaze at social work itself as a culture, and in so doing, pull together the salient issues for further reflection on social work across cultures. Key themes and ideas in this chapter are taken up in the later chapters.

Chapter 3 critically analyses the idea of cultural competence in terms of it being an influential discourse in both policy and practice, and how it is variously defined and understood in the national and international literature. The chapter discusses how cultural competence can be conceptualised not only at the individual and professional levels, but also at the systemic and organisational levels. Cultural competence therefore can be considered as a participatory approach to working with people that operates at the micro (individual), meso (institutional) and macro (community) levels. In this way, cultural competence is concerned with addressing system-wide barriers to responsive care that equally impact on a social worker’s capacity to work effectively at the interpersonal level.

The issue of white privilege and associated power relations has not received adequate attention in cross-cultural social work practice and education. In Chapter 4, Ann Joselkyn Baltra-Ulloa explores her attempts in an Australian university classroom to introduce students of social work to the concept of ‘whiteness’ in social work’s efforts to recognise diversity and work for social justice and social change. She presents an alternative pedagogy in which teaching diversity-focused social work becomes less about promoting the crossing of cultures via competent and sensitive practices and more about turning the gaze inwards and towards social work to reveal the why of what we do as social workers.

Chapter 5 explores the concept of biculturalism in the New Zealand context following the Treaty of Waitangi, the nation’s founding agreement between Māori and the settlers who emigrated to New Zealand. This chapter looks at how and why social work students are prepared to work biculturally in the first instance and from there to a multicultural approach. The focus is on the local southern New Zealand context, but also includes a critical analysis of the New Zealand approach, considering the Social Workers Registration Board’s requirement to assess cross-cultural competency.

In Chapter 6, Supriya Pattanayak explores social work practice and education in India noting that the underlying theoretical framework is very much a Western import and does not take into account the extensive diversity in the Indian context. Speaking from a critical theory and postcolonial perspective, she
proposes the integration of Indigenous theory and practice principles incorporating Gandhian principles of satyagraha (non-cooperation), non-violence, self-reliance and self-governance, which have exerted great influence in the everyday lives of people and communities. The discussion of epistemic violence—a term used by postcolonial writers to describe the dominance of Western thoughts and systems over non-Western knowledge and ways of knowing—on social work education in India is echoed in Chapter 7, entitled ‘Developing culturally based methods of research’.

This chapter, jointly authored by Ling How Kee and Christine Fejo-King, maintains that professional imperialism prevails in research and knowledge development of culturally appropriate social work practice. Writing in a personal style, they narrate their personal experience of conducting research, first within a Western-centric research paradigm and then breaking free from it, with insights on culturally based methods of research. The chapter discusses different ways of decolonising research before concluding with some recommendations for new reflexive research practice.

Part 2 of this book focuses on specific perspectives of or approaches to working with culturally diverse groups or in areas of practice in which culture needs to be at the core of attention. Chapter 8, entitled ‘Working with marginalised Indigenous communities’, situates cultural differences within the socioeconomic context of Indigenous communities and within the larger context of dominant social relations. Using a number of case studies from Australia, the chapter highlights the prevalence of whiteness and wilful blindness in social work and government policy, which serves to further marginalise and disempower these communities.

Chapter 9 explores social entrepreneurship as a critical adaptive tool for establishing a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of cross-cultural practice within a global capitalist context. Peter Mataira argues that social work, and the implication social work training and education, needs to reinvent itself in ways that respond purposefully to fiscal, technological, political and social innovation and change. Social work skills and knowledge must be based on an understanding of market forces and business practice, and how these might best serve the needs of marginalised individuals, families and communities. It is argued that social entrepreneurship should be taught as a macro practice course within social work with examples of social entrepreneurial activities being undertaken by Indigenous social workers in the Asia-Pacific region.

Moving on to Chapter 10, the lens of cultural safety is used to explore the resettlement experiences of new and emerging communities in Australia. For many new and emerging communities the initial settlement experience is very challenging and is further complicated due to their limited skills in English, loss of network, financial difficulties, lack of confidence, experiences of loss and trauma, and so on. This chapter explores the experiences of older Somalis and Assyrian Chaldeans and
particular, the barriers they face in accessing appropriate health and welfare services. This chapter highlights the importance of a strengths approach, embedded within the theory of cultural safety, challenging social workers to move beyond conceptions of migrants and refugees as social problems to develop culturally appropriate health and welfare service models.

Chapter 17 explores a neglected topic area in social work: end-of-life issues from a multicultural perspective. It examines the contribution of the cultural component in holistic care planning, including concepts of a ‘good death’, perceptions of pain management, and the role of different sub-systems in the patient’s environment in decision-making. The chapter identifies the discourse on end-of-life issues as guided by three main questions: First, what is a ‘good death’ (is there one)? Second, what is ‘good’ palliative care? Third, what is ‘good’ caregiving among formal and informal carers? Illustrative examples are drawn from different societies in Asia, Australia, the United States and Europe.

Chapter 12 explores the issues and challenges related to international adoption. It describes the practice of international adoption and adoption triad members in Singapore and the United States. Key issues discussed are the importance of ethnic and racial socialisation experiences of international adoptees and ethnic identity development, parental cultural competence and biological mothers’ rights in international adoption. The author, based on her experience of conducting studies in the United States and Singapore, makes recommendations for social workers working in international adoption.

In the final chapter, Jennifer Martin examines key factors relevant to building and maintaining a culturally diverse human services workforce. Issues of cultural appropriateness and quality are explored in relation to staff recruitment and retention strategies. Non-traditional recruitment strategies to source broad language and cultural representation are discussed, alongside strategies for staff retention and continuing professional development. A case study highlights workforce issues for social work practice with older members of a Vietnamese community in the northwest of Melbourne, Australia. The chapter concludes with a model for building a culturally diverse aged-care workforce.
Theories and perspectives: culturally appropriate practice, education and research
In the quest to develop social work practice appropriate for their own country, Egyptian social work scholars Ragab (1990) and Walton and Abo-El-Nasr (1988) coined the term ‘authentisation’ (or ‘authenticisation’), incorporating the Arabic concept تأسيذ meaning ‘to go back to one’s roots to seek direction’ (Ragab 1990, p. 43). They are among a number of social work writers who urge social workers in non-Western countries to recast their focus away from indigenisation—adapting Western-originated theory and knowledge to fit local needs—to that of authentisation—generating practice theory by grounding social work in the local culture (Ling 2003, 2004; Osei-Hwedie 1993). The idea of ‘indigenisation’, which began in the early 1970s and continued to the late 1990s, is said to be an outdated concept (Gray & Coates 2008).

The question of the transferability and applicability to non-Western countries of social work practice models that originated in the West has been a recurring debate among academics and practitioners. This debate has been fielded by writers from across the Asian and African continents, where social welfare services and schools of social work have been established in the post-independence era, and also in the newly established democracies such as China and Vietnam (Fulcher 2003a; Tsang & Yang 2001; Yao 1995; Yip 2001; Yuen-Tsang & Wang 2002). Midgley (1981) described this unilateral transfer from ‘the west to the rest’ as ‘professional imperialism’, and his view has been supported by others as ‘cultural imperialism’ (Ngan 1993; Prager 1985). These writers have argued that the nature of social problems in non-Western developing countries is substantially different from that of Western developed countries, so
CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL WORK ACROSS CULTURES

different fields of practice and different roles for social workers. Further, the values and philosophical foundations of social work that are rooted firmly in liberal democratic values espousing individualism, self-reliance, equality and freedom are considered to be at odds with Asian and African cultural values that emphasise respect for elders and those in authority, interdependence, communal responsibility and social cohesion (Bar-On 1999; Canda, Shin & Canda 1993; Chow 1987, 1996; Goldstein 1986; Silavve 1995). Also, the community-oriented social structures of many non-Western societies render the Western individualised casework approach irrelevant (Bose 1992; Rao 1990).

In unison with the above, First Nation and Indigenous social workers in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States have been developing practice models from the core values, beliefs and approaches of Indigenous helping practices or Indigenous cultures (Hart 2002, 2006; Morissette, McKenzie & Morissette 1993; Ruwhiu et al. 1999; Watson 1988; Weaver 1998, 1999; Webber-Dreadon 1999; Wikaira et al. 1999). Parallel to this has been an increasing recognition of the need for culturally sensitive or ethno-specific practice with immigrants and minority ethnic groups or with ‘people of color’ (Henderson 1994) in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia (Cox 1989; Devore & Schlesinger 1999; Herberg 1993; Okun, Fried & Okun 1999). This is reflected in the plethora of writings in social work and other human services professions on cultural awareness (Green 1999), multicultural social work (Ewalt 1999; Sue 2005), bicultural social work (Foster 2000; see Chapter 5), culturally relevant practice (Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird 2008) and anti-racist social work (Bhatti-Sinclair 2011). Since the 1990s, the term ‘cultural competence’ has begun to gain common usage in the field of human services and health care (Fong & Furuto 2000; see Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion). Yet another term which has emerged since the 1980s is ‘cultural safety’ (Fulcher 2002a, 2002b, 2003b; see also Chapter 10).

The key questions raised in these parallel discourses are:

- How can social work be applicable across diverse cultures and contexts?
- What models of social work will be relevant when working with people of diverse cultures and in differing countries or contexts?
- Can the methods and skills of social work be universally applied?

The central theme of all these questions is culture, or rather cultural differences between social work practice theory and method and the people that social work practitioners work with.

This chapter explores these major discourses about developing appropriate practice theory and approaches in various countries or cultures. In critiquing these positions and approaches, the much taken-for-granted concept of culture, as used in social work discourse, is ‘interrogated’. The concept of culture beyond ethnicity is explored. Also discussed is culture as a site of differences and power differentials and as relational and dynamic, and the way these impact on social work practice. We then
cast our gaze at social work itself as a culture and in so doing pull together the salient issues for further reflection on social work across cultures. The chapter concludes with a call for creating a metaphorical cultural space for open dialogue and mutual exchanges towards a greater understanding of developing culturally appropriate social work practice both locally and internationally.

**Contested approaches for culturally appropriate practice**

This section explores various positions and approaches that have been proposed or developed for culturally appropriate practice in specific society or contexts. Throughout this chapter, the term ‘culturally appropriate practice’ is used in a general way to mean approaches that are considered appropriate, rather than referring to a particular approach.

**Authentisation and Indigenous social work**

Authentisation of social work arises from the position that there are distinctive differences between the cultures of non-Western and Indigenous peoples and the values and world views of Western-originated social work practice theories and methods. The proponents of this position therefore argue that social work needs to be grounded in the world views and cultures of the people. Indigenous social work, and the development of a culturally appropriate practice model for, with and by Indigenous peoples, is premised on this position. First Nation peoples in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States have developed some noteworthy examples of Indigenous and culturally appropriate social work practice based on the principles of reclamation of their cultural identities, decolonisation, spiritual liberation and community synergy and revitalisation (Hart 2002, 2006; Hazlehurst 1994; Morrissette, McKenzie & Morrissette 1993; Ruwhiu et al. 1999; Watson 1988; Webber-Dreadon 1999; Wikaira et al. 1999). Hart (2002, 2006), a First Nation Canadian, developed an Aboriginal approach to helping based on the concept of the ‘medicine wheel’, which generally symbolises wholeness, harmony and balance, nurturing relationships and healing.

Outside Western contexts, Ow (1990a, 1990b, 1990c) in Singapore and Ling (2003, 2007) in Malaysia have observed discrepancies between clients and the professional in defining problems and problem resolution. Values such as group-centredness, harmony, respect for elders, conflict avoidance and belief in the supernatural influence clients’ perception and definition of problems and their problem-resolution strategies. Studies by Ling (2003) in Sarawak, Malaysia, further observed that local traditional helpers, rather than the social workers, appeal to help-seekers because of the mutuality between the underlying cultural themes of help-giving and help-seeking. The local helpers reinforce the help-seekers’ cultural...
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imperatives of maintaining interconnection, interdependency and harmonious
relationships among significant others, and between human and nature, as well as
between human and 'super-nature'. Ow and Ling suggest that social work practice
in the region needs to incorporate culturally based or client-oriented criteria of
problem resolution; for example, cultural principles concerning fate, family roles and
cultural precedents for handling personal problems may be utilised in an intervention
approach.

In a similar vein, O'Collins (1997), based on her experience in Papua New
Guinea, argues for culturally appropriate approaches that deliberately seek to build
on traditional methods rather than ignoring or taking away the role of the local
helpers. In Israel, Al-Krenawi and Graham (1996, 1999) have included the use of
traditional healing rituals among the Bedouin of the Negev in which the utilisation
of community resources and the strengthening of natural support systems and helping
networks serve as a part of the helping process.

In the past two decades, there has been an interest in developing Islamic-based
social work. Noting the incongruence between the dominant world views of social
work and Islamic world views, Barise (2005) proposes an Islamic-based social work
practice model incorporating Islamic values of family ties, community support and
spiritually based methods of problem solving. A fundamental difference between
the concept of 'helping' in Islam and in social work is that the help-seeker would
'see God as the ultimate source of help and helpers as means only' (p. 5). Crabtree,
Husain and Spalek (2008) also discuss how Islamic principles inform and influence
the lives of Muslim populations in the United Kingdom and illustrate how these
principles can be translated into professional practice (see also Graham, Bradshaw &
Trew 2009).

Many of the proponents of the authentisation and Indigenous social work
approaches are insiders of the cultures and therefore have personal experience of
the misfit between social work approaches and 'Indigenous ways of knowing, doing
and being' (Weaver 2008, p. 71). In spite of this, Weaver (2008), a Native American
social work academic, expresses her dilemma in using the term 'Indigenous social
work' and raises several pertinent questions. For example, social work in one
Indigenous context may not be 'Indigenous' in another Indigenous context, even
among the different Indigenous communities in the United States. Further, the
terms social work and social workers are associated with a profession that many
Indigenous peoples experience as oppressive' (Weaver 2008, p. 72), and therefore
even when Indigenous social workers are working with Indigenous clients and
communities, they may be reluctant to term their practice 'social work'. The most
incisive question she raises is 'whether helping practices truly guided by Indigenous
principles, values, beliefs and ways of life could appropriately be called social work'
(p. 72). This also raises the question of whether some traditional ways of helping
or the values embodied in the helping practices may contravene broader human
rights values enshrined in social work (Wakefield 1995). Still others challenge the claim of the universality of the definition of human rights as another form of Western imposition, and argue that human rights need to be defined in different cultural contexts (Ife 1997, 2000, 2008).

Another pertinent question is whether the world view and culture of the people in a country or among an ethnic or cultural group is homogenous. The presence of multiplicity of world views within and between varying cultural groups is not adequately addressed, nor is the changing and dynamic nature of culture taken into consideration. The People’s Republic of China is a good example. Scholars of Chinese descent have written about the development of social work in China grounded in Chinese cultural tradition and values, particularly Confucianism (Chan 2006; Cheung & Liu 2004) and the predominance of benevolence over rights in Chinese society (Chow 1987; Tsang & Yan 2001; Yao 1995). Others have critiqued this position. Huang and Zhang (2008) maintain that the Chinese social work discourse has overstated the differences between China and the West and understates the differences within China. Sin (2008) went one step further, posing the question ‘who and what is Chinese?’ Through a review of 98 articles on Chinese populations, communities and cultures, Sin (2008) observed that the ‘majority of the authors of the selected texts were scholars of Chinese descent living and teaching in Hong Kong’ and ‘ten authors writing from the Chinese diaspora in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States’ (p. 175). Sin’s questions cut right through the ‘politics of representation’ (Mohanty 1999; Smith 1999) as to whether Hong Kong scholars are ‘qualified’ to represent the interest of the people in mainland China.

The cultural knowledge approach

Arising from recognition of the need to adapt practice approaches when working with people from a different culture, the ‘cultural knowledge’ approach necessitates acquiring knowledge of substantial ethnographic cultural characteristics of diverse ethnic or cultural groups. The ethnic-sensitive social work practice model from mainly North America is inclined towards this approach (see, for example, Devore & Schlesinger 1999; Lynch & Hanson 1992). The cultural knowledge approach details cultural characteristics of varying cultural groups and imparts culturally specific techniques to help social workers from dominant Anglo-Saxon backgrounds to work sensitively and competently with people from a minority culture.

While this approach may provide useful background knowledge about clients from a different culture, it is not without limitations. The assumption that the people from one ethnic group are homogenous runs the risk of cultural stereotyping (Rogers 1995). For example, some social work writings discuss cultural differences
by focusing on varying communication styles of people from different cultures. This draws on cross-cultural communication theory, which generally views culture as differentiated by high- and low-context cultures. Low-context cultures concentrate on verbal expressiveness (generalised as Western style) and high-context cultures are more attuned to nonverbal cues and messages relying more on shared experiences. Based on this understanding, some cross-cultural communication guidebooks designed to promote Westerners’ understanding of non-Western styles of communication contain simplistic, shallow understandings and consequently condescending views of people of non-Western backgrounds (see, for example, Brislin et al. 1986).

Arguably, cross-cultural training material such as this may not be in use today; however, the observation made by Hollinsworth as recently as 2012 in Australia suggests that:

It is common for health and social care and educational services to provide training or resources that ignores or misrepresents the diversity, complexity and sometimes even the very existence of ethnic or social categories ... Generic statements are made about the ‘Burme’ when there are dozens of minority communities that are not ‘Burman’ and who are over-represented as refugees in countries such as Australia. Even more ridiculous characterizations would include Africans, Indians or Chinese (2012, p. 3).

This essentialist definition of culture based on the assumption that people can be slotted into primordially determined characteristics not only disregards the heterogeneity within an ethnic group, but further the approach can, at its worst, lend itself to be used in a racist way (Dominelli 1988; Fong & Mokuau 1994; Gross 1995). As Hollinsworth (2012, p. 3) notes, ‘The homogenization of cultural and religious groupings to which we do not belong is one of the starkest manifestations of cultural racism and should not be reproduced in cultural competency curriculum education or service delivery’.

The cultural awareness approach

Proponents of the cultural awareness approach argue that one cannot be expected to know all the different cultures, but the cornerstone to culturally competent practice is to be aware of cultural differences and one’s own cultural biases. In this approach, knowledge of a culture is less emphasised; instead, the focus is on developing social workers’ self-awareness of their own attitudes and values towards cultural differences (Bender, Negi & Fowler 2010; Green 1999; Lum 2003; Rogers 1995). The cultural awareness approach challenges the way a person views the norms and values of their own culture as absolute and uses them as a standard against which to judge and measure all other cultures. It challenges ethnocentrism—the belief that one’s own culture is superior—and promotes the view that each culture should be respected in its own right.
Training for cultural awareness often entails social workers going through a process of becoming deeply aware of their own personal cultural assumptions and biases in order to be open to other cultural points of view. An example is the inclusionary cultural model proposed by Nakanishi and Rittner (1992), who offer an experiential way of approaching cross-cultural teaching and learning.

Yan and Wong (2005) critique the underlying assumptions of this cultural awareness approach: that workers are presumed to have professional commitments, organizational control, and a level of autonomy that can transcend the limits of cultural influence, all of which enable them to help their clients in a way that culturally fits the clients' needs (p. 185) is untenable. This assumes that social workers are subjects capable of becoming neutral and impartial culture free agents (p. 181), while on the other hand the client is assumed to be passive, without the capability to react, adjust or modify their cultural limits in relation to the worker undermining the agency of the individual person.

Both cultural knowledge and cultural awareness approaches posit culture as an entity—that it is a knowable and measurable thing—and the dynamic and relational nature of culture is not taken into consideration. As Jayasuriya (1990a) cautions, knowledge of varying communication styles needs to be accompanied by an understanding of how these differing styles operate across a variety of contexts and social interactions. Social workers who apply this knowledge rigidly without an understanding of the dynamic nature of communication will be limited in their ability to foster meaningful cross-cultural interactions (Jayasuriya 1990a, 1990b). The cultural awareness model and cultural knowledge model also overlook the unequal power relations between various ethnic groups in society. As Jamrozik, Boland and Urquhart (1995) highlight, encounters between people from different cultures, which entail unequal power relationships, are likely to be conducted on the terms of the dominant culture.

The power analysis approach

The power analysis approach does not focus on culture or cultural differences; rather it emphasises social workers having an understanding of the issue of unequal power relations that marginalise minority groups in society. The anti-racist approach (Dominelli, 1988) and anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approach (Dominelli 2002; Thompson 2006) developed in the United Kingdom are exemplary in forging a power analysis approach that extends beyond ethnicity to women, people with disabilities and older persons. One of the key tenets of the approach is that the origins of the problems faced by clients lie in social structures and therefore social workers need to address the structural disadvantage faced by minority groups in society.
CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL WORK ACROSS CULTURES

The power analysis approach highlights a pertinent issue, as stated in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) definition of social work: ‘human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work’ (2012). Yet we practise in an unjust society (Jordan 1990) and are confronted with the need to challenge policy and procedural processes at the organisational and institutional level. For example, a glaring example in the context of Malaysia is the provision of health care, housing and education, which subjects ethnic minority groups in the rural regions and migrant workers to disadvantage. Accessibility (physical and financial) and social inclusion are important considerations in addressing the issues faced by the minority. On the other hand, anti-racist social work writers such as Dominelli (1988) and Dixon and Scheurell (1995) remind us that social work itself can be used as an instrument to perpetuate oppression and marginalisation in society.

Aligned with the theme of acknowledging unequal power relationships is the cultural safety approach, which has its underpinnings in critical social theory (Fulcher 2003b; see also Chapter 10). The focus of cultural safety moves beyond cultural practices to the political, economic and social context impacting upon the individual’s lived experience and social status. More recently, the gaze has turned to social workers themselves in the burgeoning writing on ‘whiteness studies’, a standpoint that interrogates the privileges and power of the dominant racial and cultural group. Ignoring white privilege, and adopting a colour-blind social work, is said to perpetuate racist approaches (see chapters 4 and 8).

The above discussion on contrasting approaches shows a parallel and interrelated discourse in social work in non-Western countries and with non-Western people and Indigenous peoples in Western countries. Within this discourse, social work is seen as historically part of colonisation and now part of globalisation in which, as some have argued, Western social work still assumes dominance (Cox & Pawar 2006). Embedded in these approaches for developing culturally appropriate practice is the concept of culture, which is examined in the next section.

Culture in social work

Culture is a highly contested concept in everyday and academic discourses. An interesting contrast between the everyday discourses of culture in Malaysia and those in Western academic literature, including social work literature, is noted. Culture is often seen as a source of pride in a people’s heritage, as reflected in statements like ‘We Chinese have more than four thousand years of culture’. Culture is also used to denote a people’s superiority; for example, ‘These people have no culture, unlike us’. Culture is used to differentiate ‘us’ from ‘them’, as in statements like ‘We have a different culture from ...’ Conversely in Western literature and in social work literature, culture is what ‘the others’ have. As anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1993)
describes, 'the more power one has, the less culture one enjoys, and the more culture one has, the less power one wields' (p. 202). The concept of culture used in social work discourse is further explored below.

Culture to denote differences

The assumption that there is a set of practices that differentiates one cultural group from others permeates discourse on cross-cultural social work. In other words, there exist varying cultures—entire ways of life, activities, beliefs and customs of a people, groups or societies. While this has been associated with race and ethnicity, as in books such as Race and Social Work (Coombe & Little 1992) or Ethnic-sensitive Social Work Practice (Devore & Schlesinger 1999), recent discussion has shifted away from race and ethnicity to the concept of culture. This is evident from the statement in the Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) Education and Accreditation Standards document, which states that cross-cultural practice refers to practice where there is a diversity of tradition and intergenerational issues; ideologies, belief and religion; and race and ethnicities (AASW 2009, p. 66).

In the field of multicultural counselling, particularly in the United States, cultural diversity encompasses gender and sexual orientation, age, religion and so on (Fong & Furuto 2001). This shift reflects a view of culture as extending to groups within society 'who spend much of their time in unique contexts that foster and reward remarkably distinctive assumptions, values, beliefs and rules for behaviour' (Koegel 1992, p. 1). Again, according to AASW, cross-cultural practice also refers to work acknowledging 'other diverse identities, such as sexual, political, professional and organisational' (AASW 2009, p. 66).

Conceptualising culture as differences opens up a range of questions about what constitutes cross-cultural social work practice and cultural competency. Park (2005, p. 13) has carried out a critical discourse analysis of the concepts of culture in a number of leading social work journals and articles and observes that culture 'has become a key signifier of difference', replacing the categories of race and ethnicity. This raises the questions, differences from what? How do we see differences? If differences are to be cherished, how do we do that? What if the differences we see are against our view of what is right and what is good? As Park (2005, p. 21) aptly cautioned, differences may be viewed against a Western framework; the 'white' mainstream is used as the point of comparison for difference and divergence, as she writes:

Against the blank, white backdrop of the 'culture-free' mainstream, the 'cultured' Others are made visible in sharp relief, and this visibility—a sign of separateness and differentiations from the standard—are inscriptions of marginality. Embedded in the conceptualization of culture as difference, in other words, is that of difference conceptualized as deficiency (Park 2005, p. 22).
CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL WORK ACROSS CULTURES

Culture as relational and dynamic

Green (1999) maintains that a relational rather than essentialist view of culture is the only useful way to think about cultural differences in a complex, heterogeneous society. Culture is then what becomes meaningful in a cross-cultural encounter.

A case study in a neighbourhood with residents from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the capital city of Kuching, Sarawak, one of the two Borneo states of Malaysia, illustrates how different culture impacts on human interaction and the interpretation of a situation (Langub 2012, pers. comm.).

CULTURE: A SITE OF DIFFERENCES

An eight-year-old boy of Bidayuh background, while playing outside his house, was bitten by the Chinese neighbour’s dog, which was let out. As a gesture of apology, the owner of the dog offered to pay the medical fee involved. The boy’s father, a lawyer by background, was considering taking a lawsuit against the neighbour for his negligence. The incident coincided with the visit of the boy’s 70-year-old grandfather from his rural village, who upon knowing all that had occurred, advised his son not to proceed with any legal action against the neighbour, nor did he want the neighbour to pay the medical fee. To both his son and the neighbour’s astonishment, he requested the neighbour give a 10-cent coin and a jar. The grandfather then performed a ritual together with the boy and everything was then “back to normal”.

This case clearly showed that the participants’ actions were guided by their cultural world view. The neighbour’s offer to pay the medical fee was guided by a sense of responsibility. The boy’s father saw a failure on the part of the neighbour to ensure that his dog did not pose a danger to the neighbourhood. How do we explain the action of the grandfather? To understand his action, we need to understand the world view of the traditional Bidayuh people of Sarawak, which is steeped in spirituality. The prime concern for the grandfather was the spiritual wellbeing of the boy. The dog bite to the child was not so much a bodily harm as a disruption of the boy’s spirit. It (the spirit) may leave him (literally) weak and thwart his growth into a strong man. To return his spirit to its original state, something of metal is needed to restore the strength of the spirit and something is required to contain his spirit—hence the 10-cent coin (the metal) and the jar. An act of restitution was made by the neighbour providing the items and the grandfather performing a ritual.

Understanding of culture in everyday life and in social work practice can be further illustrated by this case. First, culture can be thought of as a cognitive map we use to guide behaviour and interpret experience (Barth 1995). Culture could therefore be conceptualised as the organised system of knowledge and belief whereby a people structure their experience and perceptions, formulate acts and choose between alternatives (Keesing & Strathern 1998). Second, culture, as a system of
knowledge, is dynamic and changing. As this case demonstrates, the world view and beliefs of the older man are no longer held by his son. He and a younger generation of Bidayuh and other Indigenous groups of Sarawak are no longer holding on to the spiritual beliefs of their ancestors or practising the rituals associated with these beliefs. Modernisation, urbanisation and their conversion to Christianity have contributed to the changing culture (for further understanding of Bidayuh traditional culture, refer to Jarraw 1994; Langub 1994).

A point to highlight in this case study is that each party involved was willing to go by a particular set of beliefs, perhaps partly demonstrating a respect accorded to an older person in a plural community. What needs further highlighting is that the older man had in fact demonstrated respect and acceptance of the neighbour’s different culture by not asking him to join in the ritual, whereas in the village setting, or if the neighbour was from the same ethnic background, he would have been required to do so. A pertinent question to raise here is what if a case like this develops into a neighbourhood dispute and a social worker is referred?

In this situation, how then would our cultural background impact on the way we see the situation? Cultural knowledge will therefore be important to provide us background knowledge about the cultural beliefs of the diverse cultural groups we work with. Yet knowledge of the culture of the people we work with is not enough; we have to have an awareness of our own culture and how this may impact on the way we view situations like this—the cultural awareness approach. On the other hand, while cultural knowledge provides a frame of reference for working with a client from a culture different from our own, it should be stressed that the knowledge we have about a certain culture is always provisional and incomplete:

... there is a need to take into account the diversity and heterogeneity which exists within, as well as across cultures, and in terms of rural–urban divides and religious differences. Furthermore, a person can move between cultures and be multicultural; as a result such a person might hold divergent worldviews and contradictory perspectives and values. This may include individuals who synthesize different blends of traditional spirituality and formal religion; who are of mixed heritage; who converted from one religion to another; or who are influenced by different cultures within and/or outside Sarawak. The result of this ‘pluralization’ of the lifeworld means that it is unlikely that a particular culture exists as a neat and discrete category in a multicultural world (Ling 2008, p. 103).

Dean says it well:

... our knowledge is always partial and we are always operating from a position of incompleteness or lack of competence. Our goal is not so much to achieve competence but to participate in the ongoing process of understanding and building relationship (2001, p. 628).
Culture as a site of power differentials

The above case clearly illuminates the points made by Rosaldo (1993) that culture is reflected in the mundane practices of everyday life. Culture is the way a person or community constructs meanings and beliefs about family, child rearing, religion, kinship, social roles, parenting, health and mental health, ageing and death (see chapters 11 and 13). Child-rearing practices and childcare are much contested areas of social work practice, an arena in which it is all too easy for social workers' cultural and professional assumptions to take precedence (Fulcher 2012).

Several cases in Australia highlight the tendency for social workers to base their assessment on a white, middle-class framework of what constitutes positive parenting. Malin, Campbell and Agius (1996) discuss the Nunga Aboriginal way of encouraging self-regulating and self-reliant behaviour. Children are given more autonomy in their daily functioning, feeding themselves only when wanted. The writers explore how this is viewed as inadequate supervision and non-compliance in the eyes of white, middle-class Australians. Yeo (2003) explored current assessment practices in relation to bonding and attachment of Indigenous Australian children and found that assessment practices are predicated on an ethnocentric view based on Anglo-Celtic values. For example, child rearing in the Aboriginal culture is literally a family and community concern, not solely confined to the parents of the child. The child may therefore have multiple caregivers and their sense of security is derived from a network of multiple caregivers and acceptance in their community. Determining the appropriateness of Western-oriented assessment practices of bonding and attachment, without taking into account the historical spiritual and cultural contexts of Aboriginal cultural values, has serious repercussions. These concerns that Indigenous children may continue to be removed from their homes and be significantly over-represented in the substitute care population.

In this context, a power analysis approach is of great relevance to social work practice across cultures.

This discussion highlights again that social work knowledge and practice methods are very much a product of a certain culture. We now turn to examining the idea of social work as a culture.

A way forward—seeing social work as a culture

Social work theory, knowledge and skills are socially constructed, influenced by the socio-cultural milieu in which social work occurs (Payne 1997). Green (1982, 1999) argues that social work itself can be seen as a culture, having a distinctive set of implicit and explicit values, a recognisable language, a body of knowledge and received traditions, its own set of institutions and activities of maintaining its own identity. Viewing social work as a culture redirects our thinking in the following ways.
First, when we bring social work across borders, we need to be mindful that the process does not lead to the displacement, marginalisation or domination of the world views of the people or community whose wellbeing social work purposes to uplift. Second, social work, as one of the cultures of helping in relation to the other existing cultures of helping, needs to consider whether it might dominate or obliterate these other cultures. Third, social work, whether as a profession or as a culture, is ‘what social workers do’ (Payne 1996) in the same way that culture is lived and experienced by members of that culture. Social work knowledge, as culture, is constantly being interpreted and enacted by social workers according to contexts—societal and organisational—and mediated by individuals’ culture, gender, age, life experience and social position.

On the other hand, some will resist the view of social work as one culture given the divergent and even opposing theoretical positions of social work. The wide array and ever-emerging theories of social work, which have varying perspectives about individuals and society and the purpose and nature of social work, make social work a very diverse culture, if it is to be considered as a culture. This again rings true for all cultures, whether it is for the Chinese living in China or Chinese in different parts of the world (Sin 2008) or the Bidayuh in Sarawak in the case study above. Further, the assumption of a monolithic body of Western social work knowledge is debatable (Sin 2008; Yan & Tsui 2007). Multicultural social work could be extended to refer to social work itself, in addition to social work that deals with cultural diversity. Social work, whether it is developed and practised in the West or in societies in which social work is yet to take root as a profession, needs to be conceptualised as a multicultural profession interacting with multi-cultures of helping practices and multi-cultures of people we work with (Ling 2008).

Promoting multicultural social work

The fluid position of multicultural social work offers a way that a plurality of approaches for cross-cultural social work can engage with one another. Given that much social and cultural interaction takes place within societies and among peoples of the world, not all Western social work theories and approaches are irrelevant to non-Western societies. Similarly, social work approaches developed from the authentisation position and Indigenous social work will be able to influence, and indeed has already influenced, Western social work (Harrison & Melville 2010).

In addition, a multicultural view of social work draws attention to the monocultural outlook of cultural knowledge and cultural awareness approaches. Both have tended to focus primarily on how Western social work relates to non-Western contexts, and do not consider other types of cross-cultural social work interaction. In a similar way, the authentisation position and Indigenous social work, concerned with developing social work that reflects the local culture, do not pay due consideration
that the multicultural nature of most societies today, nor do they acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of any one cultural grouping. For example, a social worker may be a non-Western person working with clients of Western backgrounds, or both the social worker and client may be from different non-Western backgrounds, or they may share the same cultural heritage but from different geographical, national or class backgrounds. A multicultural perspective requires one to move away from the concern of ‘West meeting East’ to a consideration of all cross-cultural or multicultural relationships (Dungee-Anderson & Beckett 1995). As Shayne Walker and Anaru Eketone discuss in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand (see Chapter 5), cross-cultural practice refers to social workers of one cultural background working with clients of a different background and this should not exclude a Māori social worker working with a Pākehā (European Settlers and their descendents) client.

**Social work practice as an intersection of different cultures**

No-one is culture-free. Very often we are not aware of our own culture until we come across situations that are not within our frame of reference. It is possible for us to operate from our own assumptions and world views and become oblivious to other assumptions and world views. It is not an overstatement to say that every social work encounter is an intersection of different cultures. Social workers bring into their day-to-day practice their own culture and the social work (professional) culture, working under an organisational culture with clients who also bring their own culture. The crux of the matter is, in the interplay of all these cultures is the client’s culture acknowledged and appreciated? Or do we, unknowingly, in doing what we think is good for our clients, impose our culture(s) on them? Does our organisational culture—our office settings and our care facilities—consider and make provisions for the diverse cultural backgrounds of our clients? Further, is cultural diversity taken into consideration in the formulation of services and programs?

**Social work system and organisational culture**

A recent study by Harrison and Turner (2010) of social workers in Queensland, Australia, found that organisational context was seen to be very influential in determining how well practitioners respond to the cultural needs of clients. Some of the impediments to culturally responsive practice were cited as administrative tasks, bureaucratic barriers and resource constraints (see also Chapter 3). An important point raised was the incongruence between the service model employed by the organisation, which is inclined towards individual work, and the need for family and group involvement. This highlights the point that service provision, including the method of service delivery, needs to take into consideration the central role of culture in help-giving and help-seeking practices in different communities. If social work
services are offered as an alternative to existing helping systems, then the services should be provided in ways that tap community resources, thereby strengthening and empowering existing community helping systems (see Chapter 8).

In cases where residential care is the solution to a person’s situation, we need to question whether cultural diversity is being taken into account. For example, when a child is admitted to a residential care facility we should consider whether it provides any sense of cultural safety. As elucidated by Fulcher (2002a), cultural safety is a state of being in which the child or young person’s social and cultural frames of reference are acknowledged, even though not fully understood. Similarly, formulation of policies and programs needs to occur in consultation with various communities, taking into consideration community needs and aspirations, using community self-determination and empowerment as guiding principles.

**Education and knowledge development**

Conceptualising social work as multicultural has implications for social work education and knowledge development. How do we provide students and practitioners a framework of embracing diversity, yet be critical of the various approaches of culturally appropriate practice? How do we instil in students the importance of recognising culture as core to social work practice—having cultural knowledge and awareness, yet at the same time, having a critical perspective of the power analysis approach? Social work education curricula and the educational process are once again an intersection of different cultures. As Pedersen (1984) discusses, social work educators bring their own culture(s), work with students from diverse cultures and teach a third culture (social work) in the environment of a fourth culture (the educational institution). This intersection of cultures has meant for some a marginalising experience when their ways of knowing and being are incompatible with the individualised, competitive system of education, as studies with Indigenous students in Australia and New Zealand have shown (Foster 2000; Lynn et al. 1990; Tait-Rolleston et al. 1997; see Chapter 6 on social work education in India). The key issue is for the educational process to be an enriching experience for all.

Related to education is an area often overlooked in discourse on culturally appropriate social work practice: research to develop knowledge and theory. Research to generate social work knowledge and practice theory has been largely conducted using Western-centric research methodology that has ignored Indigenous ways of knowing and precluded the uncovering of local knowledge. Therefore, developing culturally appropriate practice needs to be accompanied by a process of decolonising methodologies (Smith 1999) and affirming the knowledge of clients and local practitioners (see Chapter 7).
Conclusion

The creation of an open cultural space

This chapter has explored major discourses on developing culturally appropriate practice theory and approaches. The authentisation, Indigenous social work, cultural knowledge and cultural awareness approaches guide us towards practice in which culture is given centre stage. The authentisation and Indigenous social work approaches remind us that cultural identity is a source of strength that steers a people towards community self-determination in developing their own ways of problem-solving and enhancement. The cultural knowledge approach encourages knowing about other cultures, while the cultural awareness approach extols awareness of self and an appreciation of cultural differences. The power analysis approach highlights the socio-political context that marginalises certain cultural groups and privileges others, and the inherent power differentials between social workers and their clients. Further examination of the concept of culture as used in social work approaches suggests the use of the concept of social work as a culture, thereby promoting the idea that, as different cultures are to be respected and embraced, different approaches to working with cultural diversity can also be mutually enriching.

In concluding this chapter, I call for the creation of a metaphorical intercultural space for open dialogue and mutual exchanges towards a greater understanding of developing culturally appropriate social work practice both locally and globally.

Internationally, much more learning can take place between Western and non-Western social work practitioners and educators in an open and equal partnership. When Midgley (2008) revisits the state of professional imperialism three decades on, he observes that some innovations originating from the developing world have been adopted in Western social work (see also Midgley 1990, 1992, 1994). Family group conferencing and micro-finance serving low-income communities are two examples of the West learning from developing countries. Likewise Gandhian philosophy, which has influenced social work in India, has inspired community development approaches in social work in Western contexts. More avenues need to be created through conferences and the use of technology to promote truly reciprocal exchanges.

Memoranda of understanding about various areas of exchanges, including knowledge-building, staff and students' exchanges and research, could be increased to facilitate two-way collaboration. A noteworthy example of collaboration is the student and academic exchange between RMIT, Australia, and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia, which has been ongoing for the past eight years. In particular, student exchanges, in which selected students conduct their studies in respective universities for one semester, have yielded much insight for the content and delivery of culturally relevant curriculum and the development of teaching and learning.
practices. These have greatly benefited students and staff from both institutions (Martin & Ling 2010).

The complementarity of the various approaches calls for a more dialogic understanding and mutual engagement so that cross-fertilisation of ideas will generate new insights for the personal and professional development of social work practitioners and educators. An intercultural open space in which the spirit of humility and curiosity prevails to engender greater understanding of cultural diversity and professional differences may well be the way forward.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on an experience of a cross-cultural encounter in your social work practice or other relevant situation. How do you think the approaches discussed in the chapter are relevant?

2. Reflect on an experience of working with a person of the same cultural and linguistic background as you. Did anything strike you as different? How did this experience influence the way you think about culture and cross-cultural practice?

3. What is your view of 'social work as a culture'?

4. Do you agree with the statement: 'All social work encounters are cross-cultural'? Explain your answer.

5. Is there a place for authentisation and Indigenous social work? What might be some of the issues and challenges in promoting these approaches?

6. ‘Socio-political and economic contexts impinge on cross-cultural social work practice.’ Explain your understanding of this statement.

FURTHER READING


REFERENCES
