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## Cultural "Competence" and Social Work Education: Moving Towards Assessment of Practice Behaviors

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**Cultural “Competence” and Social Work Education: Moving Towards Assessment of Practice Behaviors**

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### **Abstract**

Social work educators are responsible for ensuring that future practitioners be “culturally competent” and have the ability to work effectively with people from different backgrounds. The purpose of this paper is to address the current limitations in measuring cultural “competence,” and to report on the results of a qualitative study examining stakeholders’ conceptualizations of the definition, educational process, and evaluation of cultural “competence” in social work education. Findings support longstanding assumptions in the literature regarding the need for social workers to develop certain knowledge and attitudes as prerequisites of becoming culturally competent, and emphasize the need for further exploration of the way social workers define cultural “competence,” translate it into discrete practice behaviors, and assess how students demonstrate these behaviors.

## Introduction

Social justice is a core component of the mission of the social work profession (National Association of Social Work (NASW), 1999). As such, social workers believe that discrimination and prejudice directed against any group damage the social, emotional, and economic well-being of society as a whole. Emerging demographic realities in the U.S. necessitate the development of effective social work practice to promote the overall well-being of an increasingly diverse society at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. To achieve the goal of social justice in a multicultural society, social work educators have largely sought to teach students to be “culturally competent,” a celebrated, albeit largely undefined concept that has been strongly endorsed and even codified by NASW (2001). This goal is based on the underlying assumption that the acquisition of cultural competence will help social workers achieve more socially just outcomes. Although this assumption has never been tested, social work educators have the responsibility for ensuring that future practitioners become “culturally competent” or acquire the ability to work effectively with people from different backgrounds (Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), 2008).

Although attention to diversity has been a part of the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) for almost forty years, the standards have shifted from an emphasis on knowledge about specific groups to a focus on attitudes and behaviors that reflect appreciation and respect for, and the ability to practice competently with difference (Jani et al., 2011). This shift reflects the movement of social work educators from an outlook of “colorblindness” (in the late 1960s) to one of ethnic sensitive practice (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999) and multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s, to the current emphasis on cultural

competence (Lum, 2007). This concept, however, is ambiguously defined in the literature and, therefore, challenging to measure and teach. The purpose of this paper is to report on the results of a qualitative study of social work stakeholders' conceptualizations of cultural "competence" in social work education and to address the current limitations which exist in measuring its attainment.

### **Diversity Standards in Social Work Education**

The most recent version of CSWE's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), Educational Policy 2.1.4, *Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice*, identifies culturally appropriate engagement as the core of effective practice with diverse populations rather than the mere acquisition of abstract cultural competence (CSWE, 2008). Current educational policy, therefore, goes beyond requiring students to understand and be aware of the role of multiple identities, subjectivity, and social context in shaping human behavior, and the complex relationships that exist between people and their environments. It now also requires them to develop the *ability to practice effectively* with diverse populations (Jani et al., 2011).

In so doing, the new EPAS revised and expanded the previous definition of cultural competence. Previous iterations of EPAS reflected an assumption that cultural competence could be operationalized through knowledge and attitude acquisition alone, defined as '*learning about*' the shared history and characteristics of various groups (Bonder, Martin, & Miracle, 2002). Thus, the standards assumed that all that was required to practice competently with diverse populations was to acquire greater knowledge about these populations and heightened awareness of one's own world view.

By contrast, the revised EPAS (2008) "introduces the notion of requisite student competencies comprised of interrelated practice behaviors as the organizing principle for

curriculum design...a significant departure from..." previous standards (Holloway, Black, Hoffman, & Pierce, 2009, p. 1). It emphasizes the measurement of *practice behaviors* as indicators of professional competencies. There is general consensus that the ability of social work students to be "culturally competent" or practice competently with diverse client groups is a process that includes three components: (1) development of an awareness of one's own cultural values, biases, power, and position, and how these factors affect a social worker's relationships with clients; (2) understanding the client's world view (including the ability to elicit the client's cultural beliefs); and (3) development of culturally appropriate interventions (Green, 1999; Lum, 1999, 2007; Sue, 1982; Sue & Sue, 2012). Yet, there is no agreement in the literature regarding what constitutes a culturally appropriate intervention, what the practice behaviors of a culturally competent person are, or even the underlying purposes of achieving cultural competence.

Due to the competency-based outcome approach upon which the 2008 EPAS is based, an approach which will essentially be retained in the proposed 2015 EPAS, social work educators need to operationalize and measure students' ability to engage diversity and difference as an educational outcome. Critics of the behaviorally-based competence approach (Engelbrecht, 2007), however, assert that it is a narrow and conceptually flawed approach to education that focuses on measurable outcomes rather than development and pays insufficient attention to defining the benchmarks of specific competencies, how to attain them, or to how they should be evaluated (Carpaccio et al., 2002). Thus, one of the primary challenges associated with assessing social work diversity education is the lack of suitable measures of "competence" in this area (Boyle & Springer, 2001; Kumas-Tan et al., 2007; Schim, Doorenbos, Miller, & Bekert, 2003).

### **Measures of Diversity "Competence"**

There are several commonly used scales designed to measure “competence” with diversity, including the Cross-Cultural Competency Inventory (CCCI-R; LaFramboise, Coleman, & Hernandez, 1991), the Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge-Skills Inventory (MAKSS; D’Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991), the Multicultural Counseling Awareness Scale (MACS-B; Ponterotto, Sanchez, & Magids, 1991), and the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI; Sadowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994), the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale (MGUD; Fuertes, Miville, Mohr, Sedlacek, & Gretchen, 1992), and the Ethnic-Competence-Skill Model in Psychological Interventions With Minority Ethnic Children and Youth (ECSM; Ho, 1992). Although the latter four were recommended for use in social work (Krentzman & Townsend, 2008), there is not yet sufficient validation of these instruments to justify their application to the assessment of clinical outcomes or educational goals (Boyle & Springer, 2001). Although most of the measures demonstrate acceptable reliability, there is limited and/or unsatisfactory evidence regarding their validity, especially their construct validity (Kumaş, -Tan, et al. 2007).

As reflected in the 2008 EPAS, the field of social work is moving away from defining difference solely in terms of race and ethnicity toward an understanding of the impact of multiple identities, such as sexuality, gender, age, and socioeconomic status, on human behavior. Existing measures, therefore, may not adequately capture a student’s ability to work with diverse populations. In addition, there is no research linking scores on existing measures to actual practice behaviors (Boyle & Springer, 2001). Finally, none of the above instruments is specific to social work or addresses the need for assessment tools that can be used for both internal program evaluation and external accreditation (Bogo, Regehr, Hughes, Power, & Globerman, 2002; Bogo, et al., 2004).

In an effort to create a social work specific measure, Holden and colleagues have constructed an argument for using self-efficacy as a core outcome of social work education, based on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (e.g., Holden, Anastas, & Meenaghan 2003/2005; Holden, Anastas, Meenaghan, & Metrey, 2002). They have created the Social Work Self-Efficacy Scale (SWSE), a measure designed to assess "social workers' confidence regarding a broad range of social work tasks" (2002, p. 117). They describe self-efficacy as an indicator of an individual's "assessment of his or her confidence in their ability [to] execute specific skills in a particular set of circumstances and thereby achieve a successful outcome" (2002, p. 116). However, the SWSE does not specifically address diversity and efficacy does not necessarily indicate one's ability to engage with difference. This concern is also reflected in current measures of awareness or knowledge; they do not necessarily reflect a person's ability to practice. In addition, confidence has been found to have an inverse relationship with the *ability* to work with difference (Alpers & Zoucha, 1996; Nokes, Nickitas, Keida, & Neville, 2005).

In addition to the assumptions that higher self confidence in one's ability equates with higher ability in practice, and that difference is largely about race and ethnicity, existing measures reflect other underlying assumptions about the measurement of cultural "competence." These include the notion that quantifiable knowledge and attitudes are sufficient to achieve skill competence, that a higher quantity of experiences, familiarity, communication, or engagement with a group leads to a higher skill level to work with difference, and that the practitioner is from the dominant group and, therefore, that the acquisition of cultural "competence" is largely a matter of obtaining knowledge about the ethnic "other" (Kumaş-Tan, et al., 2007).

In sum, as schools of social work strive to comply with the 2008 EPAS, they need to develop accurate measures of students' competence to engage effectively with difference and



diversity. The primary purpose of the research reported in this paper was to begin to address this gap. It describes the first stages of the development of a measure of social work students' ability to engage with diversity and difference in practice. Recognized as experts in scale and measure development, Benson and Clark (1982) and DeVellis (2003) outline the specific steps that need to be followed. Two primary steps in the scale development/evaluation process which they identify include (1) theoretical development of the measure, and (2) development of content. Interviewing and collecting information from key stakeholders are identified as core methods for carrying out these steps in the scale development process.

Based on this approach, this paper describes a qualitative study that gathered information from key stakeholders, including MSW and BSW social work faculty, students, and field instructors, in order to expand our conceptualization and understanding of cultural "competence" as an essential outcome of social work education. Through the collection and analysis of this information, the authors hope to be able to engage in the next step of scale development and create a pilot measure of students' ability to engage with diversity and difference.

### **Use of the Term 'Cultural Competence' in the Research**

As stated above, the development of valid scales requires clarity about the concepts that researchers are attempting to measure. In its use of the concept of intersectionality, the 2008 EPAS recognizes that culture is but one aspect of difference. This is a subtle but significant distinction from the discussion of intersectionality in recent cultural "competence" frameworks since it uses the concept as an overarching perspective rather than a single element (CSWE, 2008; Lum, 2007). This change may reflect several recent critiques of the use of the term "cultural competence" within social work scholarship (Abrams & Moio; 2009, Ortiz & Jani, 2010).

These critiques emphasize the following points: First, culture is fluid and ever-changing and, therefore, “competence” in a culture can never be permanently attained. Second, the acquisition of a sufficient level of “competence” required to engage effectively with diversity and difference involves more than merely understanding and valuing other cultures; yet this is often how cultural “competence” is interpreted. Even this limited outcome objective can only be realized through the processes of dialogue and explanation, and ongoing efforts to understand alternative worldviews.

A third shortcoming of the concept of cultural “competence” has been its underlying assumption that culture is a uniformly positive phenomenon. This interpretation has precluded discussions of the negative impact of cultures on other populations included under difference or diversity – for example, the sexism or homophobia which some cultures exhibit. Osteen, Vanidestine, and Sharpe (2013) found that even when individuals endorsed ideals of social justice and equality, this did not automatically translate to positive regard across the range of culturally identified groups, but instead that positive attitudes and beliefs were contextualized in identity-specific groups. Lastly, any discussion of diversity requires an understanding of its social function and its relationship to social stratification, power, and oppression (Ortiz & Jani, 2009). This understanding is critical to any discussion which relates the issue of diversity to the goal of social justice, as social work does.

Despite these numerous critiques, the concept of cultural “competence” reflected a significant advance in social work education’s conceptualization of practice in an increasingly diverse environment and has been well received in many human service professions. Because of its widespread popularity, the term “cultural competence” is now used as an umbrella term for “practice with difference.” Although recent efforts encourage a shift from ‘cultural competence’

toward ‘cultural humility’ or ‘cultural responsiveness’ (Nicotera & Kang, 2009), the underlying assumptions remain virtually the same, reflecting a rhetorical shift rather than a substantial distinction. Because of the familiarity with the term “cultural competence,” and its widespread usage by social work faculty and students, we used it to describe the concept when we began to conduct our research.

The research described in this paper aims to answer the following questions from the perspective of each key stakeholder group: (1) What are the components of cultural “competence”? (2) How can those components be demonstrated? (3) How should cultural “competence” be taught? (4) How should cultural “competence” be measured? (5) What demonstrable outcomes should be used to evaluate cultural competence?

### **Methods**

The authors conducted a qualitative study that used some grounded theory methods to guide the thematic analysis of the data (Creswell, 2007). We facilitated ten targeted focus groups at two large mid-Atlantic universities: one group with BSW faculty, three with MSW faculty, two with MSW students, two with BSW students, and two with field instructors who teach both MSW and BSW students. Due to high participant interest among the MSW faculty, more focus groups were conducted with that group. Conversely, only one group was conducted with the BSW faculty due to the small size of the program. A total of 64 people participated in the focus groups. Participant demographics can be seen in Table 1.

Recruitment involved sending emails to departmental distribution lists, departmental postings, and purposive selection of participants. The invitation to participate consisted of a brief description of the study, its purpose and procedures, and the researchers’ contact information. The invitation to participate was also published in the school’s daily bulletin, an online source of

the School of Social Work (SSW)-related information provided daily on the SSW homepage to all SSW faculty, staff, and students via email. Finally, an advertisement was posted in the MSW and BSW social work departments. Faculty, students, and field instructors who expressed an interest in participating were sent an information letter and an electronic copy of the informed consent form for review. They were also given information on the days and times that focus groups would be held and asked to commit to one of the available groups. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants before each focus group began. This project was approved by the IRB at both universities.

Focus groups were held in classrooms on the campuses of the MSW and BSW programs during spring and fall 2012; each lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. To protect confidentiality, the researcher team assigned each participant a random name to use with a name card for the group. All tapes, notes, and subsequent transcriptions, presentations, and publications will use the assigned random name to identify the participant. All participants were encouraged to maintain the privacy of other participants and the content of the group's discussion. After consenting to the research, participants were asked questions that followed a semi-structured interview format, in which specific topics were covered while also allowing for participant-identified topics to be discussed.

Three basic domains were included in the semi-structured interview guide: (1) Definition of cultural "competence" (Sample questions: What is cultural "competence"? What are the components of cultural "competence"? Do you consider yourself culturally competent?); (2) Teaching and Learning Cultural "Competence" (Sample questions: How should cultural "competence" be taught? What should be taught? How did you learn about cultural "competence?"); (3) Evaluation of Cultural "Competence" (Sample questions: How can those

identified components of cultural “competence” be demonstrated? How should cultural “competence” be measured? What demonstrable outcomes should be used to evaluate cultural “competence”? What practice behaviors demonstrate your cultural “competence”? Are you culturally competent? If so, how do you know?) The themes that emerged from the data reflect answers to questions from all three domains.

Focus group discussions were audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed using components from Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory method. No software program was used to analyze the data. Data were independently coded through an open coding process by the three members of the research team. As part of this process, phrases and ideas from the data were conceptualized through a labeling process, and memos and diagrams were sorted and used to give meaning to the identified concepts and their interrelatedness. This open coding process led each researcher to arrive at substantive codes. After these core concepts were identified by each researcher independently, they were discussed, compared, and synthesized by the research team during team meetings. Although the researchers shared a common framework about the conceptualization of cultural “competence” and its role in education and practice, the process of cross validation provided opportunities for identifying and challenging potential bias. As part of the selective coding process, memos and diagrams were then sorted to identify cross-relationships, and to further integrate and refine categories. Central themes were derived from this process. This process took place over a nine month period and during four different meetings. The process produced three major themes, with three subthemes under each, detailed in the next section.

## **Results**

Themes emerged across all stakeholder groups in each of the three basic domain areas. In the first area, ‘definition of cultural “competence,”’ three themes surfaced: (1) Cultural

“competence” itself is a flawed concept; (2) Self-awareness and understanding a client’s identity are essential prerequisites of working with difference; and (3) There are important traits involved in working with difference. In the second domain, ‘teaching and learning cultural “competence,”’ three themes were also identified: (1) Learning to work with difference is a process, not a tangible outcome; (2) Variations exist in how teaching and learning about difference occurs; and (3) Course management is essential to teach this material effectively. Finally, in the third domain, ‘evaluation of cultural “competence,”’ three themes were also present: (1) Educational outcomes and practice behaviors were not always synonymous or congruent; (2) Good social work practice is “culturally competent” practice; and (3) Alternative measurement approaches are needed to assess students’ and practitioners’ cultural “competence.” The themes and their interrelatedness are further detailed in this section and in the discussion section that follows.

### **Definition of Cultural “Competence”**

**Cultural “competence” itself is a flawed concept.** One theme that emerged from the focus groups was the limitations of the concept of “cultural competence” itself. Participants reported that the term lacks meaning because it is defined and practiced in so many diverse ways by different people. There was agreement that the term implies a static, unobtainable end-point at which a practitioner has developed all of the requisite knowledge and skills for working with individuals from *all* other cultures. As such, it does not take into account the dynamic, interpersonal process that takes place when working with difference. This includes the notion that working with difference is a bi-directional process, not a uni-directional one that assumes the worker has all the expertise. Both practitioner and client are cultural beings who are connected to larger identity-based systems of culture while simultaneously existing as individual

cultural beings. Thus, cultures interact in practice, rather than clients being acted upon, as the term suggests. A student participant noted,

Even as [social workers] are ...making some kinds of thoughts about the [client], the [client] is doing exactly the same with us. So we might be thinking the words or hand gestures we're using are appropriate [for communicating] but they might be interpreted entirely differently, and find at the end of a session that in fact the communication trail didn't happen at all.

Largely, faculty and students agreed that the current interpretation and conceptualization of cultural competence as a skill to be used to connect to clients of different ethnicities diverts attention from issues of power and oppression. One student said, "I feel like the term cultural competency has sort of diluted the race conversation..." Another student pointed out, "cultural competence seems to be associated with race, but doesn't include a discussion of it." On a similar note, a faculty member said

I think it's important for students leaving this program to understand that there are larger forces at work, that global and national and societal forces really shape who has what and why and under what circumstances and so that becomes part of our understanding of the people we deal with and the groups we deal with.

Another noted,

([Cultural competence] is about a redistribution of power somehow. Where people who have had less somehow feel powerful or empowered...so a disclaimer [on the term cultural competence] itself, but rather the notion of power distribution, balancing the equation more.

Despite dissatisfaction with the way the concept of cultural “competence” is framed, and the often unstated assumptions and implications of the terminology as described above, participants believed the ability to work with difference was important and identified both knowledge prerequisites and several behavioral traits that could enable a person to do so effectively. These are included in the following two themes under the domain of ‘defining cultural “competence,”’

**Self awareness and understanding a client’s identity are essential prerequisites of working with difference.** The faculty and student quotes above also reflect the participants’ belief that self-awareness, understanding clients’ identities and group history, and recognizing how power and oppression are operationalized are essential, although insufficient components of working with difference. They asserted that social workers must be aware of their own biases, stereotypes, assumptions, pre-conceptions, and limitations in order to fully engage in cross-cultural practice. One student stated, “I find it very difficult to keep my stereotypes to myself. I mean I don't necessarily act on it [sic] but ...it’s very rare that I can come into work with just a blank slate.”

Similarly, both field instructors and faculty described “self-awareness” or the “ability to identify one’s biases” as an indispensable *precondition* for effective cross-cultural work at any practice level. A faculty member commented on the importance of not generalizing,

It's important to understand the history of the group and maybe traditions or things that belong to a certain group, even though there's diversity within the group and that you have to reserve judgment, suspend belief, that people may not be the same.



This statement reflects both the precondition of self-awareness and the importance of knowledge or understanding of clients' identities. A student shared a similar sentiment,

Recognizing your own culture and how that influences the way that you think and perceive the world, and then kind of trying your best to understand where that other person is coming from because of how that other person kind of understand the world because of where they come from.

Participants focused not only on knowledge about clients on the individual level, but also on the need for social workers to study and explore culture at the societal level. Knowledge regarding the workings of oppression, discrimination, power, and privilege were recognized as critical, although they are often not given sufficient recognition as components of working with difference. A faculty member said,

Sometimes talking about culture and cultural competence is an easy way out of discussing issues like institutional racism or sexism or homophobia, and how, from a societal perspective, they pervade everything...it's not that we shouldn't be talking about culture but...its easier than talking about that other stuff.

On a similar note, one student commented about the knowledge she would like to gain to enable her to engage with difference:

Hopefully you would have broader knowledge of some systems in this country that have been set up for other people to fail. I mean, how some people benefit from that, and what we can do to change it.

Participants agreed that although self-awareness and knowledge are fundamental components for *preparing* to practice with difference, they are not actual practice behaviors. A student commented, “[There is this false] sense that there is something you can know or

understand and ...voila! I can now work with [another population].” Another noted, “I understand the concept, but what does it tell me to *do*?” Citing the lack of consistent definition of cultural “competence,” a field instructor reported “it’s not like empathy where you know what it looks like.” Participants did, however, identify some traits that they would consider important when working with difference.

**Important traits involved in working with difference.** Students, field instructors, and faculty reported some traits that would enable a social worker to engage with difference effectively. They include “openness,” “humility,” “flexibility,” “responsiveness,” “curiosity,” “fluidity,” “awareness,” “willingness,” “understanding,” “having a basic comfort level,” and “expecting the unexpected.” Similar to the concept of cultural “competence,” these terms are loosely defined and possess a positive connotation. In addition, they describe a person’s characteristics rather than specify behaviors. In contrast, some faculty members were able to describe behaviors including the “ability to build a relationship with people who have different backgrounds from you,” and the “ability to unravel and assemble to make critical analysis.” When asked what cultural “competence” looks like in practice, a field instructor said, “It’s more of a practice approach, or mindset, than a skill.”

### **Teaching and Learning ‘Cultural Competence’**

**Learning to work with difference is a process, not a tangible outcome.** Field instructors, faculty, and students agreed that learning to work with difference is a cumulative process that takes place over time, often throughout a career of social work *practice*. As one field instructor pointed out, “It is a lifelong commitment. You are never going to take an exam, pass, and move on.” Similarly, a faculty member reported that she tells her students, “if there’s one thing I want you to understand, (it is that) you will spend the rest of your life understanding other people. It’s a process.” Faculty reported witnessing progress over the course of students’ time in

the program. “Over time, you can really see the progression of their papers, the level of discourse in the classroom, what they are willing to talk about, the kind of feedback they give each other...” Similarly, a student getting ready to graduate said,

I just finished my fifth or sixth self-reflection paper I’ve done since I’ve been here...it is really enlightening because I went back and read the first paper I wrote and then the last one, and it really helped me appreciate the changes I have made [during my social work education].

Because social work students come from diverse backgrounds, with varying employment and personal experiences, they come into the educational environment at vastly different levels of cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. A faculty member stated,

Some students come in as an eight, some students come as a five, some students come in as a three... It's just so fluid.”

Thus, identifying progress around students’ ability to work with difference, rather than specific behaviors, was important to participants.

Due to the progressive nature of learning to work with difference and the wide diversity in students’ backgrounds, students, faculty, and field instructors spoke of the importance of experiential learning as an effective teaching tool. One student remarked, “[Cultural competence] is teachable because I’ve learned it. But it’s exactly how I talk about it... [that] we don’t know what we don’t know . [I] talk about building on experiences so that they’re more purposeful.” Several students, faculty, and field instructors discussed the experiential exercises they found useful in teaching and learning diversity content, such as journaling, participating in an activity such as the Star Power game, or the use of mapping tools such as the Culturagram.

**Variations exist in how teaching and learning about difference occurs.** Participants reported variation with regard to course structure, content, and goals for the classes in which they were enrolled. Faculty and students said that content on diversity and cultural competence is delivered using either a stand-alone or an infusion model, and each has its pros and cons. A stand alone approach is best described as either offering a course on multiculturalism (which may include issues of power and privilege and/or content on multiple culturally-identified groups) or targeted courses on specific populations (e.g., Social Work with Black Families). There was general agreement, however, that courses using this model -are often upper level electives and, therefore, permit student self-selection. It may also shift the cultural focus onto the group of interest (?) and not the social worker, promoting a ‘norm’ versus ‘other’ mentality, and also may shift “responsibility” from all faculty to only those faculty teaching “diversity” courses. Still, a stand-alone foundation course that focuses on oppression, power, and privilege as they relate to race, religion, disabilities, and sexuality, could provide a baseline for all students as they move forward and would ensure that such content is not taught as an afterthought. The infusion model, in contrast, promotes shared, collective responsibility among the faculty for addressing culture throughout the curriculum but often leads to dilution of this content and allows for little accountability. One student noted,

I noticed whether it was a clinical class or policy class, that cultural competence was left toward the end of the semester. It just became systematic. It was very noticeable. I thought initially that it was done in an attempt to get the class comfortable to talk about the subject but that never happened.

Faculty and students expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment with the lack of space for content on diversity provided by social work education. While faculty reported frustration

with time limitations inherent to an infusion model, student participants desired increased possibility for discussion.

In my research classes we were supposed to do an observation of the people [in a setting with primarily poor Black people from the [inner] city. When students were talking about [how it was] dirty and smells, that somebody cussed their child out, my teacher didn't go into any type of conversation around race, around diversity, around the fact that this isn't the [norm for all Black people]. I felt like that was a missed opportunity to educate people.

Students also felt it was an ethical duty of a social work professional to be able to hold such conversations,

[Social workers] have to be facilitators of this conversation, at dinner tables, at community meetings because that's where these conversations are going to happen. It would have been great if we could have been trained to be able to hold that space for people.

Students perceived that faculty had responsibility for creating that space, as described in the following theme.

**Course management is essential to teach this material effectively.** Faculty, students, and field instructors concurred that the environment created by instructors plays an important role in how effectively diversity content is delivered and received. Although students noted missed opportunities (as stated above), faculty and field instructors were aware of their responsibility and ability to create a safe atmosphere in which students can openly discuss their views on diversity and use these discussions to enhance students' understanding and knowledge. A faculty member described how she begins her courses,

I say this is going to be a safer environment than you may be in for a while and we're going to give each other a wide berth to talk about issues about how we're the same and how we're different... we're going to have to give each other a break on what we say and if somebody says something that you think might be perceived as offensive you can say that.

Similarly, a field instructor reported,

We have to be mindful as field instructors and as supervisors that we have to create a trusting environment meaning if that student or an intern comes to you and says I just really can't stand working with "those" people, you have to allow that place to be trusting enough so that they can say it so you can process it.

All participants considered the ability to have open and honest dialogue was a necessary component of learning to work effectively with difference. Modeling was important to students and students perceived some faculty as lacking the interest and/or skills to address issues of culture in their classes. "We need faculty members that can facilitate those discussions regardless of what, [they believe] or where they are. And I think that's where we're lacking. I think our professors don't have the skills themselves to facilitate a safe environment to have those conversations." Another student noted, "My professor said 'this is how I run my class, these are the people I work with, and these are the [only] people we're gonna talk about.'"

### **Evaluation of cultural "competence"**

**Educational outcomes and practice behaviors were not always synonymous or congruent.** Participants in the study distinguished the identification and measurement of educational outcome indicators from the measurement of actual practice behaviors or skills for

working with difference. Faculty and students were generally in agreement about what constituted important educational outcomes: (1) ability to identify own biases; (2), acquiring sufficient knowledge about different cultural groups; and (3) critical thinking skills. A faculty member noted that an educational outcome of cultural “competence” was, “Critical analysis, the ability to unravel and reassemble.” Similarly, a field instructor described an outcome of cultural “competence” as “adopting a critical perspective, awareness and comfort...a questioning attitude.”

As seen in the participant comments cited above, commonly used assessments of educational outcomes included academic or reflection papers, discussions in classes or field supervision, and the use of process recordings, role-plays, and other experiential activities. In addition, a student proposed “assessing students’ historical knowledge of system issues related to culture, race, and difference in this country...”

However, almost all of the participants struggled to identify valid methods for assessing students’ actual *skills*, or practice behaviors that would demonstrate “competence” in working or engaging with difference. Describing a student with self-awareness, knowledge, and critical thinking skills, a faculty member said, “they still can’t walk out [into a practice situation] and know exactly what to do with that information.” Several faculty and field instructors stated that cultural “competence” in practice was an indefinable quality. “I know it when I see it,” a field instructor commented. Another participant agreed: “You can’t quantify it, there is no recipe.”

Members of each participant group noted that the lack of clarity in defining key terms such as ‘competence,’ and “engaging with difference” made it difficult to identify practice behaviors. A faculty member questioned, “What is the purpose of cultural competence? Why? What do we expect is the outcome of culturally competent students?” In addition, the lack of

clear definition and purpose leads to difficulty teaching the content, as described by another faculty member, “If we don’t know what we are teaching, then how can we say that [student] changed because of what we taught?”

**Good social work practice is ‘culturally competent’ practice.** Several participants reported that they knew culturally “competent” practice had taken place when agreed upon goals were met and they were thus able to “practice effectively across cultures.” Referring to how she conceptualizes the ability to work with difference, a faculty member stated “when you are able to achieve what you want to achieve [with the client system].” Another faculty member recognized the underlying assumptions and risks involved in regarding the conceptualization of culture as a separate, discrete entity, apart from practice as a whole,

[Past studies demonstrate the most important qualities of a worker] are respect and things like that, but it was not cultural competence but the competence of the worker that clients wanted...but [cultural competence] has emphasized that it’s very, very difficult to work across cultural boundaries to the point that students don’t even think they should try. That’s very, very dangerous for the future of our society.

This idea that “*Good practice is ‘culturally competent’ practice*” ran through each participant group. A field instructor said,

Good practice is good practice. This person could be against gay marriage but is connecting with a gay client. Do I think they’re culturally competent? Probably. If we’re talking about it and they’re like “it’s against my beliefs but my other belief is I have to serve this client” then to me if they’re engaging and doing the practice and I’m supervising that and I think they’re doing a good job right there’s the competency. It’s not a cultural competence, it’s a practice competency.



**Alternative measurement approaches are needed to assess students' and practitioners' 'cultural competence.'** Although they had difficulty identifying discrete practice behaviors that would indicate the ability to work with difference or be culturally competent, participants did brainstorm alternative suggestions for how to measure student "competence" in this regard. Some participants suggested that measurement could take place in the field using process recordings; others proposed the possibility of using simulated cases or vignettes. In addition, faculty, field instructors, and students all promoted the idea of using client feedback to assess students' abilities. A faculty member said, "What do the clients think? What do the communities think? What do the receivers of whatever we are doing? The feedback we get in many cases (may be) very different than what we thought we were doing."

Participants also noted the importance of measuring the evolution of student thinking, knowledge, attitudes, and skills to recognize individual progress. They cited two reasons for this assertion. First, the acquisition of cultural "competence" is a *process*, and second, because the student body was diverse. However, one faculty member perceived a problem with this approach. "There has to be that level that we say 'if you don't know this or you are not to this level, we can't graduate you.'" Another remarked

For me it comes back to the word competence. As a school we have to define some level at which students are supposed to be at to finish. It's not [low] and it's not [high] but where is it? There are going to be students who come in having already achieved it...and then there are some you gotta [sic] work with. It goes back to, what are the metrics for this benchmark?

A final difficulty with the measurement of the practice behaviors encompassed in the ‘ability to engage with difference’ had to do with the gray area inherent in cross-cultural work. A faculty member compared it to teaching ethics.

There is an ethical screening tool and we could give them something like that for cultural competence that says, “here are some things to think about”. It’s acknowledging that you probably don’t feel prepared for this...so here are some helpful things to take with you...so you have something concrete. But it’s acknowledging too that that’s not something we hope to ever provide for you because we can’t.

This faculty member’s comment also addresses one reason for students’ perception that they are not prepared to work with clients from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, she brings up an important measurement issue regarding the distinction between measuring *educational outcomes*, such as knowledge and attitudes, and practice behaviors, or *skills*, that, participants believed are acquired during a lifelong process of *practice* that includes the assembly of its discrete components.

### **Discussion**

This research contributes to the literature by enhancing our understanding of how cultural “competence” is defined, taught, learned, and could be evaluated. It also provides insight into some of the challenges to the competency-based learning approach, and the next steps that would need to be taken to develop a pilot measure of students’ “competence” to engage with diversity and difference. As in all research, there were several limitations to the study. Although the sample size is fairly large for a qualitative study, and included field instructors from a variety of area social service organizations, it included only students and faculty from one school of social work who self-selected to participate in the study. Thus, the findings are not generalizable,

although they may have relevance to a larger population. In addition, the study's qualitative design did not allow the researchers to determine any causal relationship between teaching methods and educational outcomes. However, the results are informative for the content and construct development of a measure of student outcomes. Lastly, it is important to note that faculty members were involved in conducting the focus groups. It is possible that students did not express all their thoughts or concerns because they were speaking to faculty; to address this issue, students currently enrolled in any of the researchers' classes were precluded from the study, as were the researchers' academic advisees and field students. Nevertheless, the authors believe that the data in this study provide insight into the definition, education, and evaluation of cultural "competence" and can further the conceptualization of diversity in social work education.

Findings from this study support longstanding assumptions in the literature regarding the process of becoming culturally competent -- that developing self awareness, and an awareness of the client's world view are prerequisites to providing effective interventions (Sue, 1981). Many existing scales of cultural "competence" solely measure these two important, but insufficient steps to being culturally competent (Krentzman & Townsend, 2008). However, data from this study emphasize that the third component, the practice behaviors involved in implementing culturally appropriate interventions, needs further exploration.

The results of this study also underscore the complexities and subtleties involved in teaching cultural "competence" and in evaluating students' educational outcomes. Given the dual emphasis of current accreditation standards -- to teach students to practice effectively with difference and to measure their attainment of competencies and practice behaviors -- the way we define cultural "competence," translate it into discrete practice behaviors, and assess whether

students can demonstrate these behaviors is particularly important. The findings indicate that a more nuanced perspective on the meaning of the construct of cultural “competence” and its translation into practice is needed.

The ambiguity of current definitions of cultural “competence” and the lack of clarity about what constitute measurable educational and practice outcomes have created substantial difficulties for faculty who are charged with achieving these challenging goals, as participants’ comments reflected. They remarked that the separation of cultural “competence” from overall practice competence is artificial. In the real world, cultural “competence” is a prerequisite of practice competence; in turn, practice competence seamlessly incorporates the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that comprise cultural “competence,” an integrative process that takes place through experience over time. As the findings of this study suggest, this requires social workers to acquire critical thinking skills and the ability to initiate and sustain dialogue with persons from diverse backgrounds. The distinction that is sometimes drawn or implied in social work literature distorts the educational process by separating the acquisition of practice competencies from the attainment of cultural “competence” and other practice behaviors. Social work educators need to find a way to address these essential components of practice in a holistic manner.

This presents a particularly vexing challenge because of the conflict between competency-based education, which focuses primarily on the assessment of measurable, practice outcomes, and traditional professional training, which emphasizes holistic learning and development, including the value and attitudinal dimensions of practice (Talbot, 2004). Although a competency-based approach may provide specific guidance regarding performance expectations, as was seen in the data, it does not indicate “how” these goals should be achieved

or “why” it is important to achieve them (Mulder et al., 2009). Clarification of the goals of a competency-based approach needs to occur in order to develop effective teaching strategies and methods of assessing students’ attainment of these competencies.

In the study, the participants’ inability to identify clearly culturally competent *practice* behaviors underscores this point and poses another often unasked question: What is the purpose of a social work practitioner becoming culturally competent? The original purpose of diversity education was to enhance students’ understanding of concepts such as discrimination, oppression, power, and privilege in order to develop practice skills consistent with the profession’s goal of social justice. Data from our study demonstrate that the current working understanding of cultural “competence” does not address those concepts, nor do popular alternative terms such as “culturally responsive” and “cultural humility.” Participants’ comments in our study reflect a desire to realign the educational process with previous goals; they also reveal that participants regard the underlying purpose of cultural “competence” today as the ability to practice social work ‘effectively’ and achieve desired goals with people of all backgrounds. The 2008 EPAS refers to this as the ability to “engage diversity and difference in practice,” but it does not define engagement clearly and, as a result, this competency cannot be easily taught or measured. In addition, engagement is assumed to be a desirable end in itself; yet, the current approach to assessing cultural “competence” omits a critical examination of practice goals, how they are determined, and by whom.

This study attempted to identify the underlying constructs that provide the foundation for the development of culturally competent practice through professional social work education. The findings take the first steps in the creation of a pilot measure that will assess students’ ability to engage with diversity and difference. The data suggest that a measure of cultural

“competence” might include assessment of knowledge, attitudes, and practice behaviors. Knowledge and attitudes may be best measured using quantitative methods, and assessment of practice behaviors will likely require a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. The next step in the current study is to develop the content of the assessment through consultation with content experts and pilot testing the measure. Following this assessment of pilot data and any necessary changes, the measure will be implemented with a large sample of BSW and MSW students for the purposes of psychometric evaluation. Future research in the field should explore in more depth how practitioners, faculty, and students articulate the practice behaviors that reflect cultural “competence” and how these behaviors develop at different career stages. It should also examine how clients perceive the expression of cultural “competence” in practice interventions in diverse settings.

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	Students		Faculty		Field
	BSW	MSW	BSW	MSW	Instructors
<b>GENDER</b>					
-Male	3 (15%)	2 (14%)	2 (20%)	6 (43%)	0 (0%)
-Female	17 (85%)	12 (86%)	8 (80%)	8 (57%)	6 (100%)
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY</b>					
-AA/Black	2 (10%)	6 (43%)	2 (20%)	2 (14%)	0 (0%)
-C/White	14 (70%)	5 (36%)	6 (60%)	10 (72%)	6 (100%)
-Hispanic	2 (10%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
-Asian/Indian	1 (5%)	2 (14%)	1 (10%)	2 (14%)	0 (0%)
-Biracial	1 (5%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
<b>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</b>					
-Lesbian/Gay/ Homosexual	1 (5%)	8 (57%)	2 (20%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)
-Bisexual	3 (15%)	4 (29%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
-Straight/ Heterosexual	16 (80%)	2 (7%)	8 (80%)	13 (93%)	6 (100%)
<b>AGE</b>					
	<i>M=25</i> <i>(SD=6.8)</i>	<i>M=30</i> <i>(SD=6.4)</i>	<i>M=51</i> <i>(SD=8.6)</i>	<i>M=49</i> <i>(SD=12.7)</i>	<i>M=48</i> <i>(SD=7.2)</i>
<b>TOTAL</b>	20	14	10	14	6