Understanding MSW Student Anxiety and Resistance to Multicultural Learning

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Understanding MSW Student Anxiety and Resistance to Multicultural Learning: A Developmental Perspective

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ABSTRACT. This article situates expected anxiety and resistance to multicultural learning within the broader context of cognitive, behavioral and affective stages through which MSW students typically progress. The authors discuss the challenges to multicultural learning and the developmental phases of students. The ways in which these developmental stages shape multicultural learning are examined. Implications for course placement, content, and student evaluation are made. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www. HaworthPress.com> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

Social work educators have long focused on how to make multicultural learning, which includes attention to diversity and oppression, meaningful (Chau, 1990; Garcia & Van Soest, 1999; Lee & Greene, 2002; Plionis &

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Lewis, 1995; Torres & Jones, 1997; Van Voorhis, 1998). Students are often required to critically examine their cultural identities, their power and privilege, and their abilities to integrate these insights into practice. Not surprisingly, a significant pedagogical challenge is student anxiety and resistance, which may be manifested through provocative statements, superficial engagement, silence, or censorship of others (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Higginbotham, 1996). Educators often assume that students are resisting the content, but multicultural learning also induces anxiety because of the process. Students are called upon to examine (often for the first time) their fundamental views of fairness and equity, and then assimilate this knowledge into their emerging professional identities (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Van Soest, 1994). Multicultural learning can threaten a student's sense of self and society. Thus, anxiety and resistance are reactions to content and process, both of which need to be assessed and addressed by educators.

Most work on pedagogical strategies regarding anxiety and resistance to multicultural learning, however, does not take into account the broader context of student development. In general, professional learning engenders student anxiety, particularly in beginning stages (Reynolds, 1942). In this article, anxiety and resistance to multicultural learning is situated within the cognitive, affective, and behavioral phases through which MSW students typically progress when faced with any new learning (Deal, 2000; Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Holman & Freed, 1987; Ralph, 1980; Saari, 1989; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). First, a brief overview of the tasks of multicultural learning and what factors prompt student anxiety and resistance is provided. Next, a summary of models of professional development is presented. Discussion then centers on how to align the tasks of multicultural learning with general developmental stages so that specific students' difficulties, such as anxiety and resistance, are understood as components of broader learning challenges. Finally, there is discussion of the implications that this framework has for teaching multicultural content.

TASKS OF MULTICULTURAL LEARNING

The term "multicultural" is problematic, as it includes a range of meanings (for a review from a social work perspective, see Fellin, 2000). We subscribe to a broad and inclusive meaning–a multicultural perspective is built on understanding the cultural dimensions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, age, nationality and

disability (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Torres & Jones, 1997). Also important is that a multicultural perspective addresses oppression through the analysis of power and privilege, domination and subordination, and focuses on taking appropriate action. Within social work, multicultural education and training involves cognitive, behavioral (skill), and affective arenas including an ability to understand one's own cultural reference points and how they shape practice; to obtain knowledge about the cultural identities of others; to be aware of and accept differences as strengths; and to develop culturally competent assessment capabilities (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Sowers-Hoag & Sandau-Beckler, 1996; Torres & Jones, 1997).

Multicultural learning can be quite challenging, which may be why student anxiety and resistance are main concerns of educators (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Higginbotham, 1996; Moffat & Miehls, 1999; Plionis & Lewis, 1995; Torres & Jones, 1997; Van Soest, 1994). With respect to multicultural learning, students seem to have three interrelated worries. The first is about the content, specifically as it relates to the dynamics of oppression (as opposed to learning about various populations). Content about power, especially for privileged students, is threatening to their sense of how the world "works." The second is a fear of self-revelation, that they will be "stupid," "racist," or "bigoted." Specifically, they are concerned that they will learn some terrible secret about themselves (e.g., having prejudices). The third is over what others, specifically their peers, will think of them. Students want the opportunity to be heard, yet fear censorship if they make "mistakes" (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Higginbotham, 1996; Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Van Soest, 1994). All of these concerns can coexist with a student's stated desire to learn multicultural content and should be considered normative with respect to multicultural learning.

These concerns can be manifested through various expressions of anxiety and resistance. Some students, especially those threatened by the content, may try to sabotage discussion. Claims of course bias, reverse "victimization," and the "right" to be provocative (e.g., make racist or sexist comments) are strategies to distance oneself from what is perceived as "dangerous" material. Students who employ such tactics, even if unconsciously, may have difficulty embracing the profession's commitment to diversity and equality. More likely, however, are those students who indicate a willingness to learn the content, but fear exposure. In order to protect themselves, they are likely to be silent or to withdraw. They have a preference for "learning by just listening." Even if students want to engage in self-exploration and foster connections with

others, they are often averse to experiencing discomfort that comes with multicultural learning (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Higginbotham, 1996; Hyde & Ruth, 2002).

A fundamental challenge for instructors is to create a "safe enough" environment for students to engage in the risk-taking often necessary for multicultural learning (e.g., exposure to new ideas, self-examination). In addition, instructors need to strike a balance between the airing of dissenting or unpopular opinions and holding students accountable to professional ethics and standards. It is regarding these points that the strategy of discussion ground rules or guidelines is employed. Encouragement needs to be offered to nonparticipating students, through such avenues as small group discussions and structured exercises (Plionis & Lewis, 1995). Instructors also need to help students understand the role that discomfort and risk-taking plays in their education and development (Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Lee & Greene, 2002; Torres & Jones, 1997). Yet educators could also benefit from understanding the broader developmental processes for students, as this context helps inform an understanding of student learning capacities.

MODELS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Models describing the stages students typically undergo in learning to become practitioners in the helping professions have been delineated in social work (Holman & Freed, 1987; Saari, 1989) and counseling/psychology (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Ralph, 1980; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). Although differing in which aspects of learning are included or emphasized, these stage models share many similarities. Table 1 (columns 1 and 2) summarizes the characteristics of affective, cognitive and behavioral developmental areas for foundation and advanced students.

All of the models describe beginning students as feeling highly anxious, self-conscious, and vulnerable. Students beginning professional education have high expectations for themselves (Holman & Freed, 1987) while simultaneously feeling threatened by situations that require new learning (Saari, 1989). The models describe the sequence of students' cognitive development in similar ways. Consistent with how individuals gain knowledge in any area, beginning students understand the client and the helping process in simplified, concrete, and global terms. Students at the beginning of professional education are self-focused, tending to rely on their own experiences and perceptions of the world in understanding others (Holman & Freed, 1987; Stoltenberg et

TABLE 1. Development Stages of MSW Students and Implications for Multicultural Learning

Developmental Stage	Student Characteristics	Implications for Multicultural Learning
Foundation Year:		
• Cognitive	• Concrete thinking • Concepts understood on global, simplified terms • Focuses on self • Reliance on own experiences	• Clients seen in simplistic, stereotypical ways • Lacks conceptual framework to organize cultural information • Uses own world view to understand others
• Behavioral	• Gives advice • Asks concrete questions • Action-oriented approach	• Difficulty making culturally-sensitive assessments • Approach may be incompatible with needs of some client populations
• Affective	• Anxious • Self-conscious • Feels inadequate • High expectations of self	• Fears appearing unknowledgeable or incompetent • Reluctant to be self-revealing • Self examination may threaten idealized self-concept
Advanced Year:		
• Cognitive	• More complex conceptual understanding • Own conceptual framework being developed • Increased client individualization	• Able to explore culture as a variable in individualizing clients • Difficulty differentiating culture-specific from unique characteristics of clients
• Behavioral	• Skills lag behind understanding • Uneven performance with possible temporary regression • Limited range of interventions	• Understanding of how culture affects self and others is greater than ability to apply to practice
• Affective	• Increased self-awareness • Increased self-confidence • May have crisis over responsibility for own bias/prejudice/privilege	• Greater learning receptivity around threatening content • Greater openness to self-exploration • May approach crisis through either exploration or defensiveness

Based on a synthesis of Carney and Kahn (1984), Deal (2000), Friedman and Kaslow (1986), Holman and Freed (1987), Ralph (1980), Saari (1989) and Stoltenberg et al. (1998).

al., 1998). They have difficulty distinguishing important from insignificant information (Holman & Freed, 1987).

Behaviorally, beginning students experience a need to provide immediate help. Their interventions with clients include asking concrete questions (Ralph, 1980) and giving advice (Ralph, 1980; Saari, 1989), which are consistent with the simplistic and concrete ways that students at this developmental stage understand clients and their situations. This desire to

help coupled with their poorly formulated understanding of what is wrong often leads to premature activity (Saari, 1989). As beginning students fear exposure of any ignorance or error, they are reluctant to be self-revealing (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Holman & Freed, 1987).

By approximately the second semester of their first field placement, students are making beginning connections between theoretical concepts and client characteristics and behaviors, although their cognitive development exceeds their skill level (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Holman & Freed, 1987; Saari, 1989). Since students are generally learning about pathology at this point, they tend to apply this information to themselves and fear discovery by their social work educators (Saari, 1989). Holman and Freed (1987) theorize a shift from self to client focus in MSW students at this stage leading to an overidentification with the client.

By the second year of professional education, developmental theorists tend to see students as having greater self-confidence and a desire for greater autonomy. Because second year MSW students' understanding of theoretical concepts still lacks depth, they may criticize theories as inherently stereotyping clients (Saaria, 1989). Holman and Freed (1987) describe students' intellectual framework as consolidated, but tentative. Students are increasingly able to individualize clients and view them with greater complexity (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Awareness of self and others increases as students feel less threatened by the learning process and more interested in exploring and understanding their own inner lives and the lives of their clients (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Saari, 1989; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Research testing the validity of the stage models specifically developed for MSW students supports the contention that students graduate in the middle stages of both models (i.e., Stage 3 of Saari's 5-Stage model [Platt, 1993] or Stage 4 of Holman and Freed's [1987] 7-Stage model; see also Deal, 2000).

In describing advanced stages of professional development, these models assume that MSW students would achieve these levels following years of practice post graduation. Practitioners in the advanced stages of the developmental models are described as self-assured, self-aware, and comfortable with spontaneity. Their conceptualizations of the client are complex and highly individualized (Saari, 1989; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Theory is understood and used symbolically (Saari, 1989). Practitioners at advanced levels see their work with clients in relational terms and understand that their reactions help inform, not interfere with, their professional work (Ralph, 1980; Saari, 1989). Advanced practitioners plan and focus interventions, demonstrate considerable flexibility, and can use a

range of theoretical frameworks and approaches (Holman & Freed, 1987; Saari, 1989; Stoltenberg et al., 1998).

Overall, the developmental models stress the anxiety inherent in the personal development demanded by the social work education process. Development of a professional identity entails major changes in the concept of self (Deal, 2000; Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Reynolds, 1942). The pace of students' cognitive and behavioral changes is relatively slow since students' schemas of themselves and others "are relatively stable and only develop through exposure to experiences more complex than existing constructs can readily handle" (Ralph, 1980, p. 249).

APPLYING DEVELOPMENTAL MODELS
TO MULTICULTURAL LEARNING

With this knowledge of student development, the anxiety and resistance that students experience when confronted with multicultural content can be more fully understood within the broader context of the learning processes inherent in professional education. Although only one of the stage models of student development discussed above (Stoltenberg et al., 1998) explicitly addresses implications for multicultural learning, changes in students' affective, cognitive, and behavioral abilities described in all of the models suggest additional applications. In this section, all of the developmental models will be applied to understanding the challenges of multicultural learning as well as an additional model that has an exclusive focus on the stages involved in counseling trainees' development of cross-cultural competencies (Carney & Kahn, 1984). Table 1 (column 3) summarizes the application of these models to multicultural learning.

Carney and Kahn's (1984) model describes counseling trainee patterns in developing appropriate cross-cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills over five stages, making recommendations for the appropriate learning environment for each stage. Briefly summarized, trainees enter Stage 1 with little knowledge of other cultures and utilize a counseling approach that reflects their own worldview. Cross-cultural education for trainees at this stage may surface internal conflict between their ethnocentric views and the egalitarianism valued by the profession. In Stage 2, trainees lack a conceptual framework for organizing information about other cultures, yet continue to view their cross-cultural counseling skills as adequate. As trainees begin to feel guilt over and assume greater personal responsibility for their ethnocentrism, a crisis develops in Stage 3 that trainees attempt to manage by denying the importance of

cultural attributes (similarities as more important than differences) or by strongly identifying with an oppressed group. When these attempts prove unsuccessful, trainees form a new self-identity, incorporating elements of their own and others' cultural groups (Stage 4). This new self-identity coincides with flexibility in understanding cultural similarities and differences and the "ability to utilize and create counseling strategies that fit the world view of each client" (p. 116). In Stage 5, trainees assume a more active role in promoting social equality in society. Although consistent with cognitive and behavioral developments outlined in the other models discussed, this model's emphasis on the crisis inherent in trainees' coming to terms with their ethnocentrism is an important addition.

The anxiety experienced by first-year MSW students when asked to explore their own cultural identity, privilege, and views of oppression can be understood as developmentally expectable. With limited self-understanding and fear of discovery as incompetent, multicultural learning, with its demands for self-exploration and exposure, is a daunting task for beginning students. Anxiety and feelings of vulnerability about appearing inadequate or unknowledgeable may affect how receptive students are to learning (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Students commonly enter the helping professions with very high expectations for themselves (Holman & Freed, 1987). Their initial self-image is often grandiose in their view of themselves as benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent (Brightman, 1984). Educational processes that ask students to critically examine their cultural identity, views on power, and stereotypes of others can threaten students' idealized sense of self.

In addition, beginning students' understanding of others is likely to be simplistic and stereotypical in keeping with the concrete thinking and global understanding of this stage (Ralph, 1980; Saari, 1989; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). However, multicultural concepts are quite complex; applying them to self and others makes this task overwhelming. Since students at this stage rely heavily on their own experiences and worldviews, focusing on similarities between self and others rather than differences (Carney & Kahn, 1984; Holman & Freed, 1987), they may underestimate the importance of race, gender, class and other cultural dimensions in understanding others. The action-oriented approach of beginning students (Ralph, 1980; Saari, 1989) may be incompatible with the needs of client populations who require a slower pace and may undermine the ability to make comprehensive culturally sensitive assessments.

Given developments in self-awareness, cognition, and practice skills, MSW students are likely to react to multicultural content differently in their advanced (second) year. With the ability to understand clients and the helping process with increasing complexity, second-year students are developmentally ready to explore culture as a critically important variable in individualizing clients and their needs. Due to increased self-awareness and reduced feelings of vulnerability, these students can feel less threatened by self-exploration around their own cultural identity and worldview.

There remain, however, several difficulties with learning multicultural content at this developmental level. Students may continue to apply complex cultural content rigidly. As skill in conceptualizing clients in highly specific terms is just developing, students may have difficulty differentiating clients' unique characteristics from those that are culture-specific. In efforts to integrate their knowledge of human behavior within a theoretical framework, students may feel overwhelmed by yet another complex dimension to consider (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Trainees' crisis over guilt and responsibility for their ethnocentrism (Carney & Kahn, 1984) may occur, offering both an opportunity for self-reflection and a defense against it. These various difficulties may be expressed as anxiety or resistance to the material (see also Hyde & Ruth, 2002).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

In this article, anxiety and resistance to multicultural learning were situated within MSW students' broader developmental stages. Specifically, it is suggested that some (perhaps even most) of the anxiety and resistance expressed by students is not specific to dealing with multicultural material. Instead, such behavior may be expected, given the particular stage of professional development. This perspective dovetails with some current studies on the learning needs of MSW students. For example, Hyde and Ruth (2002) found that students were more likely to not participate in class discussions because of general concerns having to do with not being prepared, shyness, or believing the topic too personal, rather than reasons specific to multicultural learning (e.g., "fear of being seen as racist").

Providing a context for student resistance and anxiety to multicultural learning within normative stages of development has implications for social work education. Carney and Kahn's (1984) model for cross-cultural

education recommends high levels of structure and support in students' initial learning stages that need to be gradually decreased concurrent with the introduction of more challenging situations. In fact, they define resistance to multicultural content as "a mismatch between the challenges and supports of the training environment and the knowledge, attitudes and competencies of the trainee" (p. 112).

One implication of viewing resistance in a developmental context is in the placement of multicultural courses within the curriculum. Affective and cognitive characteristics of beginning students argue against placing a course specifically on multiculturalism (or more specific topics such as racism) in the students' first year. Although student reliance on their own experiences and worldview to understand others indicates a need for such knowledge, their anxiety, fear of exposure, and simplistic cognitive framework predict major difficulty in receiving and applying this information. The needs of first-year students also suggest the need for a structured and supportive environment, rather than a confrontational one, when multicultural content is introduced in any class. The goal at this level is to increase students' exposure to information about other cultures and help them begin to explore their own worldviews in a supportive environment (Carney & Kahn, 1984).

An "infusion" model may work better for first-year students, as key multicultural content can be introduced via broader course content. Infusion means integrated throughout a course or curriculum, rather than merely "adding" multicultural content to what is "normally" presented. For example, foundation practice courses could incorporate the importance of cultural assessments when focusing on planned client interventions or could help students assess the level of cultural development or sensitivity in their placement agencies and how that, in turn, shapes practice (Ridley, Mendoza, & Kanitz, 1994). In the foundation HBSE curriculum, information could focus on characteristics of cultural groups that students are likely to serve within the community. Students could be encouraged to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of social work theories as they apply them to various cultural groups (e.g., as found in Greene and Ephross, 1991). Care needs to be taken, however, to not reinforce simplistic or stereotypical thinking by the students with respect to the cultural identities of others.

In contrast, the lessened anxiety, greater self-awareness and developing cognitive complexity of second-year students suggests that they possess the attitudes and competence to better grapple with the complex process of understanding the impact of culture on individuals (including themselves) and the helping process itself. They may still exhibit

some rigidity in the application of cultural content and have difficulty differentiating culture-specific characteristics from a client's unique characteristics. Yet this period in their development marks a prime time for multicultural learning as these students, even in their confusion and vulnerability, develop a greater capacity for openness to variations in the human experience. Instructors will still need to contend with anxiety and, perhaps, resistance, but they can leverage the increasing self-confidence and greater consistency in performance to bolster student performance and engagement.

Advanced students would benefit from an in-depth course that specifically focuses on various issues related to multicultural content: oppression, power, privilege and cultural identity formation. Students are increasingly capable of integrating various aspects of culture into conceptual frameworks used to understand and assess client systems. They are also able to explore their own cultural development in greater depth. Courses that specifically focus on multicultural content can serve as arenas in which the complexities of this topic are discussed and debated. Yet it is also important to reinforce this material by continuing to integrate it in other courses. Advanced level practice courses can be particularly important arenas in which students continue to examine how their own and their clients' cultural identities are formed and, in turn, shape practice. This integration helps to "normalize" multicultural content within a broader social work perspective.

In-class exercises and assignments can be designed to fit with the developmental stage of the students. Value clarification exercises and case examples, in which the instructor can provide feedback as to the choices made by students (e.g., being stereotypical) while also underscoring their engagement in the helping process, work well. Evaluation of student work needs to take into account these stages. For example, while foundation-year students should certainly be challenged to explore the impact of their cultural identities in working with a particular client, it is unlikely that they will be able to delineate a sophisticated or dynamic assessment. In contrast, advanced year students may be ready to engage in an examination of their own cultural identities and societal privileges and factor such an analysis into an intervention strategy. The more instructors can build bridges between first- and second-year work (which requires considerable coordination), the better students will see the developmental flow of their own cultural competencies.

Field instruction is also affected. It is particularly important for field instructors to be aware of the developmental challenges that students

face, and to engage them accordingly. Field instructors may also need support in the form of multicultural training so that they are better able to integrate this material into the field experience (Marshack, Hendricks, & Gladstein, 1994). For foundation students, their high level of motivation to succeed can be used to help focus them on the importance of cultural sensitivity and away from their fears of incompetence. For advanced students, their capability to more deeply examine self in relation to practice dovetails with the need to learn higher-level cultural competencies.

All of these considerations place some very real demands on faculty, especially given our own knowledge of and comfort with multicultural content. Like students, faculty also respond emotionally to this material and, thus, it is essential that faculty understand what issues provoke or unsettle them (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Plionis & Lewis, 1997). Faculty competency, particularly in the area of facilitating discussions on controversial subjects, may also require attention. Research suggests that faculty are often not well equipped to handle rigorous examination of multicultural material (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Gutierrez, Fredrickson, & Soifer, 1999; Plionis & Lewis, 1997; Singleton, 1994). Faculty tend to shy away from the more difficult content on oppression and privilege, in favor of abstract and general discussions on populations at risk. This may work with first- year students, yet faculty ambivalence regarding oppression content will undermine student learning (and perhaps enhance student anxiety), particularly in the advanced year (Hyde & Ruth, 2002).

Clearly, there are unique challenges to teaching multicultural content. Yet it may be useful to consider that some manifestations of these challenges, such as student anxiety and resistance, are also behaviors inherent in the development of a professional self. Much like social workers are taught to "meet the client where s/he is," educators would do well to "meet the student" with sensitivity to the different demands of professional stages (see also Lee & Greene, 2002). Understanding the impact of culture in the development of oneself and others is too important to simply deliver to students without consideration of their learning capabilities. A complex understanding of self and others is essential for competent social work practice. Multicultural learning, presented with an understanding of students' developmental needs and capacities, offers rich opportunities for facilitating the development of a professional self in which the impact of culture is an essential component.

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