

Social Welfare in the Territory of the Republic of Serbia and Cultural Competence: Challenges and Barriers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge, attitudes and practical outcomes of social welfare employees in the territory of the Republic of Serbia when it comes to skills of cultural competence, as well as to analyze the capacities of organizations/institutions in this domain. That is, the main focus of the paper is the effort to better understand the complexity of challenges and barriers faced by employees in social welfare in relation to the knowledge and skills acquired so far through formal and informal forms of professional development. In the first part of the paper, a brief overview of the importance of cultural competence skills is presented, as well as the potential challenges in social welfare in that domain. The main part of the paper is focused on the interpretation of research results and discussion, pointing to the need to build cultural competence when it comes to professionals, but also their organizations/institutions. Finally, the main contribution of this paper is to point out the importance of permanent education and professional development of professionals in the field of cultural competence, which has as its ultimate goal services that are in line with the best interests of users and their real needs.

Keywords: Social welfare • Professionals • Cultural competence • Challenge

Introduction

Culture is one of the key factors in human perception and interpretation of the environment that surrounds him. Bearing in mind that the profession of social work starts from the perspective of observing a person in his social and cultural environment, understanding cultural differences is one of the most important skills of a social worker, as well as other professional (co)workers in the social welfare system.

Cultures are in constant flow and their characteristics also depend on various internal and external factors. From the above statement follows the fact that cultural competence is a process of acquiring skills and knowledge necessary for effective functioning in intercultural situations. It requires continuous thinking about oneself in relation to others, as well as in relation to the systems with which professionals are connected, and it can be said that the function of cultural competence (i) is emancipatory [1]. Similarly, cultural competence is not a specific goal to be achieved, but rather a reminder to continually strive to learn more about the individuals, groups, and/or communities we work with or interact with. It is important to note that the concept of cultural competence was firstly introduced in public health and medicine during the 1980s and 1990s, and soon after became a word of encouragement of intercultural

communication, human rights, social justice, etc., and in other disciplines and professions.

Various attempts to translate multicultural ideology into the domain of social work and social welfare have resulted (among other things) in the adoption of the concept of cultural competence in this applied scientific discipline and profession. The concept first appeared in the social work literature called ethnic competence [2]. Today, NASW defines cultural competence as “the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services, thereby producing better outcomes”. In addition, this association identifies relevant competencies that should be included in social work practice:

- Ethics and values
- Self-awareness
- Intercultural knowledge
- Intercultural skills
- Provision of services
- Empowerment and advocacy
- Diversity of the workforce
- Vocational education
- Language and communication

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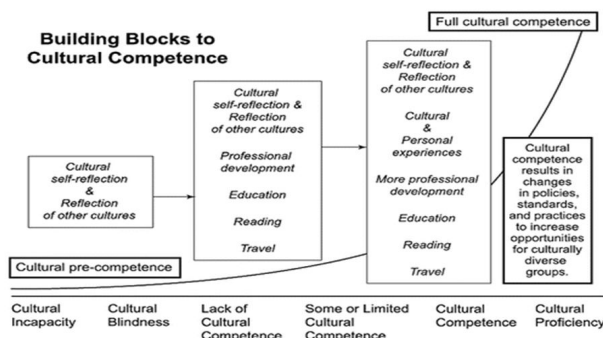
- Leadership for the improvement of cultural competencies.

In fact, the concept of cultural competence is built through synergy of three factors. The first is the practitioner's cultural awareness of his or her origins, cultural values, attitudes, and/or identity. Namely, it is important to understand the magnitude and extent of the influence of one's self on the understanding of other cultures, in order to have a basis for further understanding of cultural diversity. The second factor refers to cultural knowledge of concepts such as multiculturalism, interculturalism, deep culture, etc., as well as specific knowledge of political and social power relations in a society within which social workers (and other professionals) operate. The third concept is related to the skills related to (inter) cultural communication, i.e. the way we communicate for members of different cultures.

Similarly, cultural competence through emotional intelligence, cultural knowledge, motivation, openness, resilience, reflexivity, and various skills. Cultural competence as "knowledge of cultures and cultural practices (own and others), complex cognitive decision-making skills in an intercultural context, social skills for functioning effectively in different groups, and personal attributes that include flexibility and openness to new ideas".

The process of building cultural competence, i.e. the idea is to always start from self-reflection (cultural) beliefs and values of the practitioner, but very important aspects are professional development, reading about other cultures, travel, direct contacts with other cultures, etc. All this together makes a culturally competent practice that supports human rights and is in line with them (Figure 1).

Figure1: Building blocks to cultural competence.



Effective social work practice requires more than passive acceptance of (culturally) different users. Culturally responsible practice is, above all, the affirmation of diversity and the valuation of all individuals/groups, regardless of which culture they belong to. Namely, the key in this context is dialogue, which is a means through which we find out what the user wants, or what he needs. Dialogue implies an open conversation, exchange of knowledge, thoughts, ideas and perspectives between the professional worker and the user. The influential Brazilian educator Paulo Freire also wrote about this concept (mostly in the context of education), who views dialogue as a central element of every pedagogical process. He emphasizes that the dialogue is not a mere conversation, but cooperation between different actors that allows each side to express their opinion and views. If Freire's ideas are translated into the domain of social work, dialogue is important because it shows the user that his

opinion and experience are equally relevant, and positive outcomes arise as a result of dialogue between professionals and users.

There are no studies in the territory of the Republic of Serbia that have examined how professionals in the social welfare system experience intercultural models (e.g. cultural (self) awareness, cultural communication, etc.) and to what extent they (and their institutions/organizations) implement these principles in practice. In response, this research aimed to investigate and analyze the general perspectives of employees in social welfare, i.e. their knowledge, skills and experiences, as well as the level of readiness of institutions/organizations to deal with (inter)cultural challenges.

Materials and Methods

Sample

The research sample consists of 101 respondents (22 males and 79 females) who are employed in social welfare in the territory of the Republic of Serbia. When it comes to the age structure of the sample, 16.8% of respondents are aged 18-29, 34.7% are aged 30-39, 32.7% of respondents are aged 40-49, 12.9% are aged 50-59 years and 3% of respondents are 60 and older. The largest percentage of respondents work in urban areas (72.3% of respondents), 10.9% in suburban areas and 17% in rural areas.

Variables and instruments

Cultural competence - the variable is operationalized by a scale made for research purposes.

Attitudes and knowledge about cultural competence-the variable is operationalized with 10 items of the scale that refer to attitudes and knowledge about cultural competence

Culturally competent practice-the variable is operationalized with 23 items related to individual cultural competent practice and 10 items related to the culturally competent practice of the institution. Obstacles in culturally competent practice-operationalized by the problems that professionals face when trying to realize culturally competent practice.

Ways of overcoming obstacles-operationalized by the attitudes of professionals about the possibilities of improving culturally competent practice.

Non-formal education related to culturally competent practice-operationalized by the number of attended trainings aimed at the development of culturally competent practice.

For the purposes of the research, a questionnaire was made with 48 items: 41 items using a five-point Likert scale (1- I totally disagree, 5- I totally agree) and 7 items using multiple-choice questions. The scale includes indicators: attitudes about cultural competence, knowledge about cultural competence, and cultural competence practice of the institution. In addition, the questionnaire contains questions related to the obstacles that professionals encounter in working with users of other cultures, to the way professionals inform themselves about users of other cultures, as well as to the development of culturally competent practices.

The reliability coefficient of the scale (Cronbach's alpha) is 0.95, which indicates that the reliability of the scale is satisfactory.

A mixed method research was used, since it combined qualitative data related to barriers and ways of overcoming them on the one hand and quantitative data related to the years of service in the social welfare system and the number of attended trainings, on the other hand.

Questionnaires have been sent in online form to the e-mail address of the institutions of the welfare in Serbia. We used the snowball sampling method. Data were collected in the period from October to December, 2020. The collected data were processed in the SPSS 21.0 statistical package.

Results

By insight into the descriptive indicators, it can be seen that the most pronounced attitudes and knowledge regarding cultural competence, in relation to the practice of both individual professionals and institutions/organizations in the social welfare system. When it comes to the number of professional trainings on the topic of cultural competence, it can be noticed that professionals do not undergo almost any professional training, which can have multiple negative implications for users, which will be discussed in more detail (Tables 1 and 2).

	M	SD
Cultural competence		
Attitudes and knowledge about cultural competence	81.5	11.91
Culturally competent practice of professionals	42.13	6.82
Culturally competent practice of social welfare institutions/organizations	32.97	9.84
Work experience in the social welfare system		
Years of service in the social welfare system	10.8	1.01
Professional development		
Number of attended trainings in the field of cultural competence	2.3	0.32

Table1: Descriptive statistic of variable.

	M	SD
1. Culture shapes the beliefs, value system and of behavior individuals, families/groups and communities	4.17	0.89
2. Culture is acquired/ learned through the process of socialization	4.31	0.82
3. Cultural diversity is recognized as an important factor	4.02	1.14

contributing to social wealth		
4. Prejudice is learned behavior that can be changed by increased contact and understanding different of cultural groups	4.43	0.84
5. Cultures change over time	3.62	1.11
6. Cultural competence is the ability to think effectively and appropriately, behaviors and communications in working with people from different cultures	4.51	0.79
7. Cultural competence is a process that involves continuous work on oneself throughout one's life	4.15	1.13
8. Cultural self-awareness is recognized as an important factor in evaluating and planning customer services	4.09	0.94
9. Cultural self-awareness can be seen as the foundation of communication	4.27	0.94
10. Cultural empathy (compassion or taking the perspective of a person from another culture) is necessary in order to achieve a relationship of trust with our customers	4.39	0.88
11. I understand the impact of culture on the life activities of users such as education, religion, alternative medicine, employment, family and gender roles, etc.	4.32	1.1
12. I avoid creating an impression of the user before I meet him	3.02	1.32
13. I use culturally specific tools in assessment, planning and providing services when users are from other cultures	4.43	0.78
14. I cultivate an individualized approach to each user that is tailored to his real needs	4.63	0.74
15. I respect and appreciate the opinion, values and attitudes of users, regardless of which culture they belong to	4.3	0.96
16. If the user belongs to another culture I try to read/learn something	3.97	1.13

about their customs, history, values and norms of behavior			
17. I am aware that emotions affect my thinking	3.89	1	
18. I am aware of my prejudices and have developed strategies to reduce them	4.28	0.83	
19. I am able to adapt my communication style so that I communicate effectively with users who communicate in ways other than my own	4.42	0.76	
20. I am flexible and use different skills to create a relationship of trust with users who are different from me	4.46	0.76	
21. I try to understand the perspective of users who come from different cultures and consult with colleagues about different dilemmas	4.38	0.86	
22. I do not impose my beliefs and value system on users	4.25	0.98	
23. I talk to the user about his/her culture, customs and value system	3.87	1.12	
24. Together with the user, we compare certain aspects of his/her culture with aspects of the majority culture	4.07	1.09	
25. I encourage users from other cultures to preserve their cultural identity	3.48	1.27	
26. I accept that in working with users who do not belong to the majority culture t	3.5	1.17	
27. Before providing the service, I look for information about acceptable behavior, kindness, customs and expectations that are specific to the culture to which the user belongs	4.17	1.07	
28. Ignorance of the majority language and dominant culture are not a reflection of the intellectual functioning of the user	4.41	0.96	
29. By meeting users from other cultures, I develop and upgrade my personal and professional knowledge and skills	1.51	0.94	
30. I feel discomfort, dissatisfaction and stress when the user is a member of another culture	1.72	1.09	
31. My prejudices affect me to provide services of lower quality	2.29	1.34	
32. If the user is a member of another culture, I do not take enough time to get more necessary information and materials for work	3.11	1.46	
33. I am not motivated to work with a user who is not a member of the majority culture	4.08	1.27	
34. The institution where I work organizes discussions, round tables and similar events when it comes to challenges in working with culturally diverse users	2.39	1.38	
35. The institution I work for promotes cultural diversity and empowers us with skills to bridge cultural differences	3.43	1.52	
36. The services and programs of the institution where I am employed are equally available to all users	3.72	1.39	
37. Information and services provided by the institution where I work are available in a number of different languages (primarily in the languages of a number of national/cultural minorities)	3.16	1.62	
38. The institution where I work employs people from different cultures	3.35	1.37	
39. The institution where I work is open to various initiatives and implementations	3.77	1.29	
40. The institution in which I work provides an interpreter in situations when it is necessary	3.66	1.44	
41. The institution in which I am employed cooperates with other institutions of the government and non-governmental sector in order to train staff in the field of cultural competence	3.35	1.37	
42. The employees of the institution are familiar with the implementation of various programs to combat it	4.17	0.89	

43. In the institution I am employed in, there is a sanctioning program if employees treat users from other cultures inappropriately (e.g. belittling, prejudice, etc.)	4.32	0.82
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Table2: Descriptive indicators of individual items of the scale.

When it comes to the challenges faced by professionals from the social welfare system in the context of culturally competent practice, it can be seen that most respondents state that their (biggest) problem is insufficient professional and practical knowledge and skills in this domain (72.3%). In addition, the lack of time and the small number of employees in relation to the complexity and scope of work are perceived by the research participants as a great challenge in working with users of other cultures (70.7%). Furthermore, insufficient experience in direct work with users from other cultures (52.1%), unavailability of guidebooks and practicums (43.8%), unavailability of translation services (40.2%), lack of cooperation with other sectors and better connection of different systems (37.4%), lack of interest of institutions/organizations for continuous support programs in acquiring adequate knowledge and skills (25.3%) and institutional discrimination (7.1%) are just some of the barriers that practitioners perceive as significant in working with users from other cultures.

Based on the above difficulties, the research also seeks to examine how practitioners gather information about users from other cultures. The results of the research indicate that practitioners mostly use dialogue with the user and/or his environment, i.e. through field work (94.2%). Namely, a large part of practitioners also gather data through the exchange of experiences with colleagues (76.8%), reading about his/her culture in professional articles and other relevant sources (43.6%), information available on websites and portals (23.4%), surveys and interviews and/or focus groups with users (11.2%) etc. On the other hand, 3.8% of examined professionals do not inform themselves about the user before contacting him/her.

It can be concluded that the length of service of professionals in the social welfare system and the number of attended trainings significantly contribute to attitudes and knowledge about cultural competence as a criterion variable, where the variable years of service has a negative correlation with the criterion (Table 3).

	R=0.32 R2=0.10	F=26.29	P ≤ 0.01
	B	t	p
Years of service	-0.19	-5.65	0
Number of attended trainings	0.29	6.65	0

Table3: Relationships between yeras of service, number of attended trainings and attitudes and knowledge about cultural competence.

If we look at the research results, it can be concluded that the years of service of professionals in the social welfare system and the number of attended trainings significantly contribute to the cultural competent practice of social welfare institutions/organizations as a criterion variable (Table 4).

	R= 0.26 R2=0.07	F=14.92	P ≤ 0.05
	B	t	p
Years of service	-0.12	-3.21	0.05
Number of attended trainings	0.18	4.05	0.05

Table4: Relationships between years of service, number of attended trainings and culturally competent practices of institutions/organizations of the social welfare system.

Discussion

Social workers (and other professional (co)workers) come into daily contact with members of the community who are marginalized and in some way dehumanized. This fact alone highlights the need for applying the skills of cultural competence [3]. Or more simply, practitioners should be aware of their own value systems and skilled in identifying biases and/or prejudices that may have an impact on service delivery as well as interaction with users. Namely, if the practitioner does not understand (his own) culture and value system, it is very difficult to identify the needs and available resources of the user and provide him with an adequate service.

In the subtitle Research Results, we saw that professionals encounter various barriers when it comes to cultural competence. As shown, these are mostly a small number of trainings and lack of professional development, ignorance of other cultures, unavailability of guidebooks and manuals, too much work, a small number of professionals, etc. Similarly, various authors believe that the above barriers in this context can greatly negatively affect outcomes and interventions. The case of migrants will be taken as an example. Suppose that at some point in our lives we had an experience with migrants that were not pleasant [4]. On the other hand, as a practitioner, we have been assigned a case where we need to provide a service to a migrant family. Our personal bias and attitudes towards migrants can affect how we provide a service. Of course, through reflection on personal attitudes and working on ourselves, we can be neutral while working with users. It is important to know that neutrality is also a learned skill, that is, understanding different beliefs, values, etc. influencing one's own perspectives, views of the world, as well as the services provided, is a skill that is learned like any other. In this sense, effective practitioners are able to recognize the challenges of working with culturally different users. Moreover, continuous (re)examination of practice and reflection on what could have been better (or different) in a situation is the key to responsible professional practice.

The research findings also suggest that social workers should attend trainings and/or vocational training programs to a greater extent in order to develop their self-awareness of cultural differences, but also to improve their cultural competence skills. On the other hand, respondents have showed considerable dissatisfaction when it comes to the capacity of social welfare institutions/organizations in building cultural competence skills [5]. Namely, the answers ranged from lack of interest and lack of motivation of institutions/organizations for various initiatives to lack of financial resources for the promotion of cultural diversity, but also the development of professional development programs in this domain.

On the other hand several activities that can be useful in building the capacity of institutions/organizations when it comes to cultural competence. Some of them are as follows:

- Inviting members of different cultural groups to discussions in order to gather information about different ways of thinking and attitudes
- Assessment of current strengths and weaknesses of institutions/organizations in providing culturally competent services
- Developing objectives and establishing indicators for measuring progress
- Identifying and appointing responsible persons to help ensure discussions on cultural competence
- Active advocacy when it comes to removing prejudices in the policies and practices of organizations/institutions
- Allocation of funds and resources for improving the cultural competencies of professional workers.

In this sense, the following are stated as advantages of building cultural competence when it comes to institutions/organizations:

- Increases respect and mutual understanding
- Increases creativity through new perspectives, ideas and strategies
- Increases the participation of various social groups
- Builds trust and cooperation
- Helps to overcome the fear of mistakes, competition or conflict
- Promotes social inclusion, social justice and equality.

On the other hand, certain authors criticize the concept of cultural competence. Arguments generally range from a lack of intellectual consistency to what it means to be "culturally competent"? In fact, the word "competence" can often be questioned because it implies a top-down approach, i.e. the question is who prescribes the measures, standards or (measurable) criteria used to assess cultural competence? Some of the criticisms also refer to the strong reductionist focus of this concept on the acquisition of knowledge which in fact leads to the stereotyping of different cultural groups.

Conclusion

Finally, in addition to certain criticisms, the importance of cultural competencies when it comes to professionals and service delivery cannot be disputed. Strengthening the cultural competencies of practitioners, as well as building culturally (more)competent social welfare institutions/organizations, means changing the way people think about other cultures, as well as the way they communicate. Encouraging interaction with other cultures, emphasizing the advantages of differences, division of power between people from different cultures, etc., are just some of the factors that can contribute to building culturally competent professionals, but also institutions/organizations. Consequently, this research provides a fertile ground for further addressing these challenges, but also the implications that occur at the practical level in the field of development of cultural competence in social welfare and beyond.

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