

Newfoundland & Labrador

College of Social Workers

CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE (*Explanatory Document*)



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Note: Social workers have a responsibility to be aware of and adhere to the Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2020) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics and the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice.

This explanatory document is a companion document to the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice.

INTRODUCTION

The Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) regulates the practice of social work in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) under provincial legislation titled the Social Workers Act, SNL 2010, c.S-17.2. The vision is Excellence in Social Work.

Respect for diversity is a fundamental value of the social work profession. As stated in the preamble for the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics: “The social work profession is dedicated to the welfare and self-realization of people....and the achievement of social justice for all. The profession has a particular interest in the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and/or living in poverty. Social workers are committed to human rights as enshrined in Canadian law, as well as in international conventions on human rights created or supported by the United Nations...social workers respect the distinct systems of beliefs and lifestyles of individuals, families, groups, communities and nations without prejudice” (p. 3).

Newfoundland and Labrador is steeped in culture, and the context of social work practice continues to evolve. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to ensure they demonstrate cultural awareness and sensitivity in their practice while enhancing competence to work with people from diverse cultures.

The purpose of this document is to:

- a) Inform social workers, employers, and the public on best practices for social work practice with diverse cultures.
- b) Increase awareness of the practice considerations, ethical responsibilities and continuing professional education guidelines for fostering culturally competent practice.
- c) Provide a framework from which social workers can reflect on and enhance skills, knowledge, and abilities to work with individuals, families, groups, and communities from diverse cultures.
- d) Acknowledge the role of social workers in engaging and partnering with diverse cultures and the promotion of social justice.
- e) Promote cultural competence as an integral component of social work practice.

BEST PRACTICES FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

- 1.** Culturally competent social work practice is grounded in the ethics and values of the social work profession.
- 2.** Social workers recognize and appreciate the importance of being aware of one's own cultural identity and experiences in cross cultural practice.
- 3.** Social workers seek to understand the values, beliefs, traditions, and historical context of clients and incorporate this knowledge into social work assessments and interventions.
- 4.** Social workers demonstrate the use of effective intervention skills when working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- 5.** Social workers engage in continuing professional development to foster knowledge, skills, and abilities in working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- 6.** Social workers engaged in the supervision of social work practice integrate cultural awareness and sensitivity in continued learning and skill development.
- 7.** Social workers demonstrate leadership in cross-cultural practice.
- 8.** Social workers ensure that cultural issues are addressed when providing social work services through electronic technology.

DEFINITIONS

Social Work

The *Social Workers Act* (2010) of NL defines social work as: the assessment, remediation and prevention of psycho-social problems and the enhancement of the social, psycho-social functioning and well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities by using social work knowledge, theory and skills to

- (i) provide direct counselling and therapy services to a client,
- (ii) develop, implement, manage or deliver human service programs, including those done in collaboration with other professions,
- (iii) contribute to the development and advancement of health and social policy, and,
- (iv) conduct research in the science, technique and practice of social work.

Social Worker

To refer to oneself as a social worker or to practice within the scope of practice of the social work profession in NL, an individual must meet the criteria for registration as outlined under the *Social Workers Act* (2010) and be actively registered. Registered social workers are granted the RSW designation. Use of the RSW designation affirms an individual has met the criteria for registration and has been granted use of the title and right to practice social work in NL.

Clients

Clients include a “person, family, group of persons, incorporated body, association or community on whose behalf a social worker provides or agrees to provide a service or to whom the social worker is legally obligated to provide service” (CASW, 2005a, p. 10). The word, “client,” acknowledges the power differential that exists between giver and receiver of service.

WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The Social Work Dictionary (2014) defines culture as “the customs, habits, skills, technology, arts, values, ideology, science, and religious and political behavior of a group of people in a specific time period” (p. 103). In addition to ethnicity, race, language and religious status, culture also captures gender and gender identity, age, ability, spirituality, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

Cultural competence in social work practice is multi-faceted and many definitions exist. The National Association of Social Workers (2015) refers to cultural competence as the “process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each” (p. 13).

According to Kohli, Huber & Faul (2010) “Cultural competence engages the development of abilities and skills to respect differences and effectively interact with individuals from different backgrounds. This involves awareness of one’s biases or prejudices and is rooted in respect, validation, and openness toward differences among people. Cultural competence begins with an awareness of one’s own cultural beliefs and practices, and the recognition that others believe in different truths/realities than one’s own. It also implies that there is more than one way of doing the same thing in a right manner” (p. 257). Osborn & Karandikar (2022), (referencing Green-Moton & Minkler, 2020) notes that “cultural competence refers to attitudes and behaviors that demonstrate the recognition, appreciation, and respectful adjustments to cultural differences” (p. 2).

Culture competence in social work practice does not imply that social workers must know all things about all cultures. While knowledge of diverse cultures is important, cultural competence is about demonstrated actions and being self-aware of one’s cultural identity and biases, being open to understanding the world view of others and their cultural experiences, and using knowledge, skills and interventions that are culturally responsive. (Osborn & Karandikar, 2022; Barsky, 2021; Kohli, Huber & Faul, 2010).

Cultural competence in these standards is an umbrella term for the knowledge and skills social workers require in working within the cultural context of clients. It incorporates cultural sensitivity, awareness, responsiveness, humility, safety, and culturally informed practice. Cultural competence is an on-going process of learning, relearning, reflection, and professional growth.

While there may be discussion amongst social workers on the use of the term cultural competence, its’ use is consistent with the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and the ethical value and standard of competence in social work practice. As noted in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics:

“Social workers uphold the right of clients to be offered the highest quality service possible”

“Social workers strive to maintain and increase their professional knowledge and skill”. (p.8)

Cultural competence is a recognized term used in professional literature and implies action and accountability (Herring, Spangaro, Lauw & McNamara, 2013). In the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (2015), the need for health care professionals to receive cultural competency training was highlighted as a key action. Being aware of and adhering to best practices in the provision of culturally competent services is an essential to ongoing professional development and ensuring clients receive optimal services.

BEST PRACTICES FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE (ELABORATED)

These best practices are informed by the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics, CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice, NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2015) Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice, and relevant social work and professional literature.

1. Culturally competent social work practice is grounded in the ethics and values of the social work profession.

The CASW (2005) Code of Ethics outlines the values and principles that guide professional social work practice. These values include:

- 1) Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons
- 2) Pursuit of Social Justice
- 3) Service to Humanity
- 4) Integrity in Professional Practice
- 5) Confidentiality in Professional Practice
- 6) Competence in Professional Practice

Social workers recognize and appreciate that differences exist amongst individuals, families, groups and communities. As stated in the Code of Ethics, “Social work is founded on a long-standing commitment to respect the inherent dignity and worth of all persons.....Social workers recognize and respect the diversity of Canadian society, taking into account the breadth of differences that exist among individuals, families, groups and communities” (p. 4).

Culturally competent practice requires a commitment to increasing one’s knowledge and appreciation for diverse cultures, embracing culture as a central focus in social work practice, and becoming aware of one’s own culture, values, and beliefs and how this shape one’s own worldview.

In working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, social workers must navigate ethical issues pertaining to boundaries, dual and multiple relationships, conflicts in values and expectations, privacy and confidentiality, and decision-making within a cultural context. Social workers seek guidance from their colleagues, supervisors and managers and reflect on the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

Through their practices, “Social workers oppose prejudice and discrimination against any person or group of persons, on any grounds, and specifically challenge views and actions that stereotype particular persons or groups” (CASW, 2005a, p.5). However, social workers do not support or condone cultural traditions, rituals or beliefs that are contrary to human rights legislation and international conventions (i.e., Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities).

2. Social workers recognize and appreciate the importance of being aware of one's own cultural identity and experiences in cross cultural practice.

The CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice states that "social workers acknowledge and respect the impact that their own heritage, values, beliefs and preferences can have on their practice and on clients whose background and values may be different from their own" (p. 4).

There are a number of factors that shape an individual's cultural experience including genetics, personality, professional ethics, social class, ethnic identity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, historical context, and social norms (Basse & Melliush, 2013). In fostering culturally competent practice, social workers critically examine their own cultural awareness, heritage, biases, assumptions, and beliefs. Specifically, social workers reflect on what informs their values, beliefs, and worldview, including an acknowledgement of any ism's (e.g., ageism, racism, heterosexism, sexism, ethnocentrism, ableism, classism, homophobia), and the impact these may have when working with clients from diverse backgrounds.

Social workers need to be aware of their own personal and professional limitations and develop strategies for addressing biases that may impede on their ability to practice with clients from diverse cultures. Social workers also reflect on the privileges they hold by nature of their cultural experiences and professional status, and examine power dynamics in the professional relationship that may have an impact on the social work relationship.

Social workers recognize the relational nature of cross-cultural competence. When working with clients from diverse cultures, social workers seek to understand the client's cultural views and how this relates to their own worldview and experience of culture, and engage in collaborative dialogue with the client. As noted in the NASW (2015) Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice, "social workers need to be able to move from being aware of their own cultural heritage to becoming aware of the cultural heritage of others" (p. 23).

3. Social workers seek to understand the values, beliefs, traditions, and historical context of clients and incorporate this knowledge into social work assessments and interventions.

Lee, Carlson, and Senften (2014) note that "cultural competence has been identified as an essential part of treatment when social workers and other behavioral health providers work with all people, not just those who are racially or ethnically different from themselves" (p. 59). It is therefore important that social workers acquire, or know how to acquire cultural knowledge relevant to the client. Preferably, the client should be the primary source of this information. This dialogue happens within the context of the social worker-client relationship and social workers understand that it is not the client's responsibility to become the teacher/educator about a culture.

Social workers recognize that people experience culture in unique ways, and often have multiple cultural identities that intersect to shape their experiences, values, beliefs, and traditions. Therefore, social workers avoid cultural generalizations and incorporate cultural humility into their practice. Cultural humility "involves the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to the aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the client" (Hook, Owen, Davis, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013, p. 354). Clients are the experts in their culture and cultural experiences, and having these conversations with clients is crucial.

A person's cultural experience may impact how they perceive their psychosocial needs, solutions to address needs, and expectations/perceptions of the social work relationship. Clarifying expectations around social work interventions and help-seeking behaviors is important at the beginning of the therapeutic relationship. In addition, social workers should explore with clients sociocultural influences on health and well-being, along with the clients' health beliefs, customs, rituals, cultural expressions, and conceptualization of the issue/concern.

Informed consent is integral to the social worker-client relationship, and social workers have an ethical responsibility to "evaluate a client's capacity to give informed consent as early in the relationship as possible" (CASW, 2005b, p.4). As outlined in the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice, social workers engage clients in informed consent and "provide information in a manner that is easily understood by the client and culturally appropriate" (p. 5). When working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, social workers understand that clients may not attach the same meaning to concepts addressed through informed consent (i.e., confidentiality, mental health, risk, recovery, healing, etc.). It is therefore necessary that social workers seek strategies to resolve potential misunderstandings and discuss this with the client. This may involve the proficient use of a cultural consultant and/or interpreter.

4. Social workers demonstrate the use of effective intervention skills when working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Social workers uphold the right of clients to be offered the highest quality service (CASW, 2005a). When working with clients from diverse cultures, social workers reflect on their understanding of the role of culture throughout the helping process.

Social workers consider the following key areas in fostering cultural competence in practice:

Knowledge: The CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice notes that social workers:

- Strive to understand culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures (1.2.1).
- Seek a working knowledge and understanding of clients' racial and cultural affiliations, identities, values, beliefs and customs (1.2.4).

At a minimum, social workers should have a foundational knowledge of a client's culture (historical context, traditions, values, experience of oppression); recognize the intersectionality of cultural identities, and have an awareness of any cultural stereotypes or perceptions. It is also important that social workers strive for knowledge and understanding of oppression, colonization, discrimination, social positions, power, and privilege. While this understanding is important, social workers recognize that the experience of these is not the same for all individuals identifying with a particular culture.

Skills: Social workers strive for cultural competency at the micro, mezzo and macro levels of social work practice. As noted in the NASW (2015) Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice, "social workers demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the importance of culture in practice, policy and research" (p. 28).

Social workers a) demonstrate cultural humility in practice, b) strive to enhance knowledge and skills for conducting effective assessments which incorporates culture, c) increase skills for communicating

effectively with clients, c) use conflict resolution strategies where applicable, and d) effectively use interventions and skills that are sensitive to the client's cultural experience.

Theoretical Foundation: Social workers consider their use of theory, skills, and intervention models to ensure cultural sensitivity and relevance to the client receiving services. The person-in-environment and strengths perspective provides a helpful framework for working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. The person-in-environment perspective views the individual within the context of his/her physical and social environment, and the strengths perspective places an emphasis on the client's strengths, capacities, assets, and resiliency.

Language: Social workers strive to enhance competencies in cross cultural communication, and recognize the important role of language and communication when working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. The CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice states: "Where possible, social workers provide or secure social work services in the language chosen by the client. If using an interpreter, when possible, social workers preferentially secure an independent and qualified professional interpreter" (p. 4). Where interpreter services are not available, social workers advocate for their implementation and explore alternative options for interpretation that are in keeping with the best interests of the client.

It is also important that social workers are attuned to the clients' non-verbal behaviors and communication style, and engage clients in a dialogue about the meaning attached to these behaviors. For example, emotional display, eye contact, nodding, and touch may hold different meanings for individuals and members of diverse cultures.

Self-Awareness: Social workers acknowledge their own strengths and limitations in working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds and refer clients to another social worker or professional when necessary to ensure the client's needs are met. As outlined in the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice "Social workers at the earliest opportunity inform clients of any factor, condition, or pressure that affects their ability to practice adequately and competently" (p. 10).

Social workers appreciate that cultural competence is a fluid concept and continue to strive for cultural competence in practice. This involves a process of learning, re-learning, inquiry, consultation, and critical reflection. As noted by Williams (2006) "It is important to understand that cultural competence is not developed by choosing more correct than incorrect responses but instead by making thoughtful practice decisions with the best information available and learning through a process of reflection and evaluation how to do better in the future" (p. 218).

Community Connections & Resources: Social workers appreciate the role of community when working with individuals and families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Social workers should also be familiar with community resources that may be available for clients (i.e., peer supports, organizational or community-based programming, community/cultural consultants) and provide clients with access to this information. This may also involve the building of collaborative relationships, including relationships with community leaders, elders and seniors, to promote awareness and understanding of the resources that exist with communities.

5. Social workers engage in continuing professional development to foster knowledge, skills, and abilities in working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The CASW (2005) Code of Ethics highlights the ethical responsibility of social workers “to strive to maintain and increase their professional knowledge and skill” (p.8). Fostering cultural competence requires a commitment to life-long learning, self-reflection, and an on-going evaluation of one’s knowledge, skills, and abilities in working with clients from diverse cultures.

The acquisition of knowledge and skills for working with clients from diverse cultures can be obtained from formal and informal modes of learning which may include:

- Attending courses, workshops, webinars, and seminars that concentrate on cultural knowledge, theoretical models, cultural diversity and sensitivity, ethics, and best practice approaches for cross cultural practices.
- Reading journal articles and relevant research related to cultural competency.
- Engaging in discussions with colleagues and managers about cultural competency and their experiences.
- Meeting with people from various cultural backgrounds to learn about their culture, values, beliefs, and traditions.
- Connecting with community agencies and resources that are pertinent to each client’s needs.
- Consulting with clients on their experiences of program/service delivery and engaging in additional research to inform best practices.

6. Social workers engaged in the supervision of social work practice integrate cultural awareness and sensitivity in continued learning and skill development.

The best practices highlighted in this document pertain to all forms of social work practice, including social work supervision. As outlined in the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice, “Social workers engaged in the supervision of social work practice integrate cultural awareness and sensitivity in continued learning and skill development.” (p. 13). In providing culturally competent supervision, social workers must have knowledge of diversity and culturally competent practice.

Social workers who provide supervision ensure that social workers working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds have the appropriate orientation and preparation in providing culturally informed services, incorporate discussions of cultural diversity and competency in supervisory sessions, and work with the supervisee to access continuing professional development to enhance culturally competent practice.

7. Social workers demonstrate leadership in cross-cultural practice.

Social workers are committed to social justice and advancing human rights. As noted in the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice: “Social workers strive to promote conditions that encourages respect for cultural and social diversity within Canada and globally. Social workers promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge

and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people” (p. 25).

Social workers demonstrate leadership to advance inclusive organizational policies and culturally safe services and programs, and to inform systemic change. Through their practices, social workers:

- Analyze policies, systems and organizational structures and their impact on people.
- Advocate for equity, fairness, and respect.
- Collaborate with partners and other professions in advancing cultural knowledge and understanding.
- Share information and knowledge to promote culturally safe practice.
- Work in partnership with individuals, groups, and communities to promote social justice and cultural awareness.
- Contribute to social policy development that promotes diversity and human rights.

8. Social workers ensure that cultural issues are addressed when providing social work services through electronic technology.

Technology use in social work practice continues to evolve and expand. The NLCSW (2021) Technology Use in Social Work Practice Explanatory Document outlines best practices for the use of technology in professional practice. When social workers use technology in social work practice, it is important that cultural issues are considered. The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) released Model Regulatory Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice (2015) that speaks to technology use and culture. Specifically, the standards state that social workers should:

- “When delivering services, be aware of cultural differences among *clients* and in *clients’* use of digital and other electronic technology. Social workers shall assess cultural, environmental, and linguistic issues that may affect the delivery of services” (p. 4).
- “Provide information in a manner that is understandable and culturally appropriate for the client” (p. 5).
- “Social workers shall assess whether the use of electronic social work services is inclusive and consistent with a client’s cultural values and norms” (p. 6).
- “Be aware that cultural factors may influence the likelihood of discovering shared friend networks on websites, blogs, and other forms of social media. Social workers shall be aware that shared membership in cultural groups based on race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, religion, addiction recovery, and other personal interests may create boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships. Social workers shall avoid conflicts of interest and inappropriate dual relationships based on their personal interests and online presence” (p. 8).

As technology use in social work practice advances, it is important that social workers continue to assess how technology and culture interact and ensure their own competence in the use of technology.

CONCLUSION

This document highlights best practices for cultural competence in social work practice in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended to provide guidance and support to social workers in diverse fields of practice and to raise awareness of the practice considerations and ethical responsibilities when working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. The ultimate goal is excellence in social work practice.

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2016 Ad-Hoc Committee Members

Gwendolyn Watts

Mary Sheppard

Lyla Andrew

Ashley Crocker

Cindy Parsons

Kaberi Sarma-Debnath

Annette Johns