Adapting Social Work in Working with Muslim Clients
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Current social work education programmes and textbooks often underestimate the hypothesis that providing effective services to different cultural groups requires cultural understanding. One approach that has been recommended is the localization of social work: using a fundamentally different social work knowledge base and approach with different cultural groups. To date, however, little scholarship considers how to localize social work in working with Muslim communities. On the basis of interviews with over 50 social service providers in Canada who work with Muslim clients, the present article provides insight into strategies and methods that involve localizing social work in Muslim communities, focusing on possible client characteristics, challenges, and needs from the perspective of the practising social worker. Issues of racism, spirituality, acculturation, help seeking, and client expectations of service are particularly relevant. Properly responding to these factors ultimately involves the coordinated efforts of educational institutions, agencies, and social workers, but none of this will be possible without a thorough understanding of cultural values meaningful to Muslim clients.

Keywords: Cultural Competence; Professional Practice; Localization; Education; Muslim Clients

Within the social work profession and education system, a new multicultural initiative has emerged—localization. Social work and allied disciplines use the term 'localize' to represent how knowledge is adapted to the local circumstances of culture, community, and values (Ragab, 1995; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 1999a, 1999b; Antweiler, 1998). For localization to work, a modification of social work knowledge, including different principles of community involvement, is required (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2001). Localizing the profession’s knowledge and theory makes the profession more attuned to the needs of particular cultural groups.
This movement is imperative to successful social work practice amidst the myriad of cultures throughout the world (Bradshaw and Graham, 2007). Given that Islam is the world’s second largest religion, spans the world, and has received considerable global attention since the events of September 11, 2001, the sparse attention paid to Muslim communities in many mainstream North American textbooks and educational institutions is problematic (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1999b, 2000b; Hodge, 2005). The following examples illustrate this point. Francine Turner’s Social Work Practice: A Canadian Perspective (1999), for instance, dedicates only a 10-page chapter to diversity in social work practice, a chapter dealing almost exclusively with the aboriginal population. Steven Hick’s Social Work in Canada: An Introduction (2006) includes one chapter dealing with ‘Anti Racist Social Work’, which relates to ethnic and religious minorities, but does not mention Islam. Even textbooks aimed specifically at multicultural sensitivity often ignore Muslim communities or mention them briefly in a general context. Michael Winkelman’s Ethnic Sensitivity in Social Work (1999), for instance, a book which dedicates half of its pages to the different ethnic groups in North America, totally disregards the Muslim community. Multicultural Issues in Social Work (Ewalt et al., 1996), a collection of 38 articles on the subject of multicultural social work, does not include a single chapter dedicated to the subject. The picture is identical in Devore and Schlesinger’s Ethnic-Sensitive Social Work Practice (1996). Al-Krenawi and Graham’s anthology Multicultural Social Work with Diverse Ethno-racial Communities in Canada (2003) includes one chapter dealing with social work practices with Canadians of Arab decent, but does not deal with non-Arab Muslim communities.

Islamic religion and civilization offer a basis for understanding the self, the other, and the community, and act as a meta-narrative for many of the world’s people. Given the current climate in North America, as in Western Europe, where there are well-documented instances of racially motivated attacks on Muslim peoples, social exclusion, and social alienation, there is a definitive need to consider social services specifically aimed at Muslim peoples (Abbas, 2005; Poynting and Mason, 2006, 2007; Hendricks et al., 2007). These services can help to enhance peoples’ lives and respond to the social problems associated with social exclusion and racism. Service providers, educators, and social work agencies all have a role to play in ensuring that Muslims receive effective social services. The present article outlines major principles of social work practice, based on interviews with knowledgeable key informants who provide services to Muslim communities. Particular attention is accorded to direct or clinical practice with individuals and families. Further research, beyond the scope of the present study, could usefully analyze community and social change practices with Muslim communities. While the study is concerned specifically with Muslim clients, its conclusions may prove to be beneficial to the teaching of multicultural practice in general, and working with other minority groups.

The social work profession emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and was transplanted to colonies such as Egypt and India in the interwar period. After World War II, the profession was globalized, with schools of social work emerging throughout the developing world. Invariably, these new schools were established with
cultural assumptions that originated in Europe and North America. As a result, social work in much of the developing world is deeply incompatible with the specific and divergent cultural, economic, political, and social realities of such regions of the world (Midgley, 1981, 1997; Ragab, 1990; Healey, 1999). In the developed world, a related dilemma has materialized. Over the past 35 years, social work in Europe and North America—and the social work education system in particular—has ineffectively responded to the increasing cultural diversity within nations (Herberg, 1993; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2003). As a corrective to both of these problems, scholars have defined in theory and practice approaches that help to develop social work methodology that is conducive to the particular culture in which it is applied. Some have recommended an approach that stems from an anti-oppressive model. This model allows practitioners to use all forms of identity—age, age cohort status, ethnicity, gender, nationality, race, range of ability, religion, sexual identity, socioeconomic class, among others—to understand the self, societal inequalities, and differences among all peoples (Bishop, 1994; Macey and Moxon, 1996). Others proffer a model of cultural competence that intends to maximize social workers’ cognitive and affective commitment to ethnoracial plurality (Este, 1999).

These particular approaches place much of the impetus for change in the hands of individual social workers. While individual practitioners are an important and necessary source of generating a culturally conscious adaptation of social work, they are not the only source of such fundamental change initiatives. As outlined by the localization literature, there is emphasis being placed on considering the knowledge base, rather than simply focusing on modified worker behaviour. By changing the knowledge base of social work, the localization movement aids in creating a more culturally dynamic practice setting. In the instance of Islam, localization calls for greater knowledge of Islamic religion and culture to support and accommodate ethnoracially sensitive social work knowledge and intervention.

Writing on social work education in Bangladesh, Hakim Sarker and Ahmadullah (1995) insist that a blend of Islam and social work is the optimal solution, such that the profession is no longer a ‘simple transplantation’ from Western nations to Eastern nations (p. 373). A social work scholar in Egypt advises an ‘Islamic reorientation of social work’ throughout the Arab world, describing it as ‘the ultimate indigenisation stance … to correct the traditional bias against religion in the social work profession’ (Ragab, 1995, pp. 282–283). Ragab believes that Islamic theology and worldviews should be integrated with ‘the best of behavioural/social sciences’ and ‘rigorously verified observations and generalizations’ in order to localize social work within Muslim communities (1995, p. 291). Hodge (2005) provides some beginning considerations for social work with Muslim American communities. While his study provides an extensive review of the beliefs and practices of the Muslim community in North America, and of areas of possible value conflict, he did not uphold any interviews with social work practitioners who work with Muslim clients on a daily basis and can provide practical examples from their experiences. With the exception of such broad generalizations, little has been written. Indeed, there is no precedent for studies examining the localization of social work in North American Muslim
communities in any systematic or comparative manner that can be used effectively in the social work education system. The present research is the first.

There is a deficiency of literature that examines Islam and social work. Arabic language (Abdul-Hadi, 1989) and English language (Al-Dabbagh, 1993) book chapters have contemplated that some of the basic principles of Islam could be adapted to Western social work assumptions. More widespread research has been undertaken, yet both the quantity and the scope of this research are limited. Only a few journal articles exist that have examined the influence of Islam on social work in relation to prayer (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a), traditional healing (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1996a, 1996b, 1999b), social transformation (Haynes et al., 1997), and Islamic conceptions of charity/social welfare (Azmi, 1991). These, along with a couple of small book publications that call for the localization of Islam and social work (Ragab, 1990, 1995; Hakim Sarker and Ahmadullah, 1995), comprise the totality of the literature.

Methodology

Participants

More than 50 Canadian social work practitioners from Ottawa (18), Montreal (19) and Toronto (15) were interviewed for this study. As determined by peer recommendations, all were considered to be outstanding in their field. Three categories of practitioners were examined:

1. Those who work in social services with an agency or caseload that services Muslim communities, but who are not Muslim (21).
2. Those who work in social services with an agency or caseload that services Muslim communities, and who are Muslim (22).
3. Those who are Muslim and work in social services, but not with an agency or caseload that services Muslim communities (nine—four of these Muslim respondents worked in both types of agencies).

Procedure

Each service provider was interviewed using a semi-structured, open ended format. These interviews lasted approximately two hours. Data collection followed standard ethnographic techniques, employing an active interview process that was dialogical (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Stewart, 1998). The interview protocol was incrementally revised from one client to the next, pending input from previous participants (Coulon, 1995).

The questions themselves, like the sampling procedure, relied on community members’ participation, and were determined in collaboration through a series of web-based discussions. Most of the questions developed for the interview protocol focused on how practitioners localize their approach to social work knowledge. They
necessarily varied from one practitioner to the next. For example, some of the questions that respondents were asked included: What are the models of social work intervention used by you and your agency? How does your ethno-religious background influence your practice? Provide practice examples of the influence of Islam upon social work. What are the most important pieces of knowledge a practitioner needs in order to work in a Muslim context? Describe the ethno-religiously sensitive practice techniques you have utilized. How were they useful? How do you connect with Muslim clients? What is it like to work with people of the opposite gender? How is that different for clients of the same gender? Are there differences among ethnic groups (Arab versus any other ethnic group you might encounter)? All interviews were transcribed, reviewed by the researchers for accuracy, and then analyzed using ATLAS/ti for Windows.

Analysis

Textual coding and analysis was conducted using ATLAS/ti for Windows using standard procedures for qualitative research (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). A list of descriptive codes was generated based on the general themes and topics identified by the researchers (e.g. cultural values; gender issues; pathways to care; family dynamics; responding to need; social issues; worker skills; agency barriers) during the interviews and transcription. The interview transcripts were coded using these codes. Pattern coding was conducted using ATLAS/ti’s query tool (Muhr, 1997) to identify more specific themes and constructs (e.g. client characteristics—cultural understanding and social issues; expectations and client needs; worker knowledge and skills; service delivery—barriers and considerations for effective service provision; implications for social work education). This tool uses pattern coding to examine the relationship between codes. Memoing, which involves creating short descriptive headings based on the patterns and quotations identified, was used to describe and analyze the patterns that were found. The organized descriptive statements were then interpreted by the researchers.

This procedure led to the identification of themes that relate to three perspectives on the topic of localizing social work knowledge in terms of Islam: the client perspective; the perspective of the service provider; and the perspective of the social service agency. Each perspective identified considers the challenges often faced by Muslim clients and how social work can benefit from taking a culturally specific approach to service delivery. This paper deals specifically with the service provider perspective. The manuscript seeks principles of social work practice. Limits of space preclude fulsome analysis of differences in responses among our three major respondent categories as noted above.

Findings and Implications for Social Work Education

Educators should emphasize that the key to effective practice with Muslim clients is context, sensitivity, application, and fulsome communication (the basic principles of
good practice with all clients). Fundamental to working with Muslim clients is to recognize that there are major diversities within and between numerous Muslim communities: a myriad of approaches to faith, depending both on official streams and denominations and on personal adherence to these creeds; countless cultural, ethnic, geographic, and religious origins; and different experiences from one community, one family, and one individual to the next. Profound differences, likewise, will occur from one geographic region to the next, and one agency setting to the next (be it child welfare, mental health, physical health, etc.); differences between mandated and voluntary clients; and differences in relation to the degree of client acculturation, age cohort status, level of religious observance, and other areas of diversity. When dealing with unfamiliar cultural groups, it is all too easy for practitioners to see members of the cultural group as homogenous. It is the responsibility of social work educators to highlight the within-group diversity. There is no easy set of rules, no ‘one size fits all’ scenarios; at best, we consider some guidelines that may be useful and potentially extrapolated to thinking about other case scenarios that social service workers might encounter in their own practice.

Even with familiarity with the client’s cultural background, cultural literacy is often insufficient (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2003, pp.3–5). Instead, educators should emphasize the experiential-phenomenological model for culturally competent multicultural practice, a model that ‘assumes a stance of openness, humility, curiosity and wanting to know more about the client’. The practitioners’ assumptions and previous knowledge are less emphasized in this model. When interacting with their clients, practitioners are to situate themselves as learners rather than experts. The client is treated as a unique individual rather than simply a member of a cultural group. Essentially, it is important to emphasize that interventions are to occur with the client’s full input (Graham and Barter, 1999). In addition, one must note that cultural sensitivity can be insufficient when it comes to dealing with issues raised by political conflict, or when the client is perceived by the practitioner as belonging to an ‘enemy’ group (Baum, 2007). While Baum’s (2007) study was aimed particularly at conflict-ridden areas, the perception of Muslims as being ‘the enemy’ is not uncommon in post-9/11 North America, and educators must emphasize the danger to do with stereotyping the other and in the unjust favouritism of the self-group.

The following sections will explore how social workers we interviewed perceive their interactions with Muslim clients, the challenges that they face, the special considerations that are necessary for effective service, and the barriers that they face and must help clients overcome. Respondents have addressed these areas in connection with culturally embedded experiences and practitioner skills.

**Culturally Embedded Experiences**

Like any religion, Muslim cultural values and practices can influence how clients interact with social workers (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a, 2000b; Hodge, 2005). Students are to be taught that when they become practitioners, they must be careful to demonstrate cultural understanding. This may involve understanding and working
within the Muslim family structure, and helping families to communicate. It may also involve working with the community, connecting with the spiritual and cultural leaders, and establishing community ties. Effective contacts with a Muslim community may help to ensure that social workers are accepted and operate within cultural boundaries. Respondents identified that there were strong connections between the value of community, family values, spirituality, and gender in relation to social work with Muslim clients. As noted, it is also important to note that adherence to Islamic values and practices can vary tremendously between different Muslim communities and individuals, and one must be careful not to assume that a single approach is suitable to all Muslim clients.

**The Value of Community**

Our respondents noted that their Muslim clients are often very community oriented and the community is often the first resource used to deal with problems that arise. These insights are certainly corroborated by the literature (Haynes et al., 1997; Hodge, 2005). Community status may be very important, and support from the community may be expected. In understanding community, some Muslims may emphasize cooperation, caring, equality, interconnectedness, and social support (Kelly et al., 1996). Children may be raised at the community level. Some respondents noted that the responsibility to watch over others in the community and help deal with problems may be paramount. Educators may emphasize that this may be salient among new Canadians, particularly after relocation. Given the influence that the community has on many Muslim individuals, interventions that are targeted at increasing awareness and changing perspectives at the community level may be more effective than targeting specific individuals. One respondent stated:

So a communal approach, if—what I mean by it and this might be little outrageous I mean sometimes but—if the social worker’s role becomes an outreach role to teach people in the community, to teach them what underlying approach is, what are the things that you need to follow, and these are the parenting skills that you really could follow with your kids, these are the methods of conflict resolution that you could follow, and having the whole community starting to adopt a common strategy that we’re almost recreating a bigger communal understanding.

**Family Values**

Another theme that educators may wish to emphasize is the importance that some Muslims may place on the family institution; it is the basic social unit (Haynes et al., 1997; Fernea, cited in Hodge, 2005). Clients may be reluctant to disclose information to outsiders because of informal ‘policies’ that promote resolving issues within the family (Al-Issa, 1990; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a; Abu-Ras, 2003; Youssef and Deane, 2006). Individuals may feel a certain amount of responsibility for family members, demonstrating guilt if they must give up any of that responsibility. One participant commented:
From what I’ve experienced, and I have worked with a few Muslim adults with their parents, there’s a lot of guilt there about giving up responsibility or letting someone else take responsibility because I also do the home support programme for seniors here so the transportation, the family visiting, bereavement support, and things like that so I see a lot of the guilt for giving up responsibility and they tell me, “I shouldn’t be doing this. You know, coming from my culture, this is what I should be doing”. And then the reality sets in. They’re working full time. They can’t be there all the time.

Students should note that some clients may be concerned that social workers are intent upon breaking up the family. It is thus important to reassure them that the goal of any intervention is ultimately to help the family to develop healthy relationships and adapt well to their situation. As several respondents insisted, keeping the family together, whenever possible, may be ideal.

**Faith/Spirituality**

While their level of religious observance may vary, Islam is important to many Muslims (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a, 2000b; Hodge, 2005) and religious beliefs and rituals can be both an asset and a challenge for clients and practitioners. Through religious structures, group cohesion, self-actualization, natural forms of social support and conflict resolution may be enhanced (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1996a, 2000a, 2003). Thus, it may prove beneficial for students to gain at least a basic understanding of the religion, and most importantly the five pillars of Islam—Declaration of Faith, Prayer, Charity, Pilgrimage to Mecca, and Fast in the month of Ramadan. Since charity, for instance, is a central concept in Islam, many Muslims value being charitable in both time and resources (El Azayem and Hedayat-Diba, 1994; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000b). The mosque may have a great deal of influence over families, gender roles, and socialization. Faith can help in times of grief and when faced with major problems (Weaver et al., 2003; Matthews and Marwit, 2006), and it can influence how individuals see others. The decisions that individuals make may be bound by religious guidelines. Some of our respondents noted that some rituals, such as cleansing rituals and prayers, can be double edged, providing personal benefits while also creating problems with some non-Muslims (e.g. employers). Others observed that faith can influence the mannerisms used by some Muslim individuals, including hand shaking and eye contact, potentially leading to misunderstandings in North America. Despite the many benefits of religiosity, some respondents noted that religious beliefs about the cause of problems can potentially interfere with interventions.

And that which I felt might comfort her, because she believed, but she also at that time, because she was ill, believed that she was being punished, which was not helpful. She tried to make herself better by praying all the time.

The acknowledgement of faith is critical to practice with many Muslim clients (Hall and Livingston, 2006). This critical position is emphasized by Kelly et al. (1996) who found that the majority (86%) of their Muslim participants considered the
understanding of Islamic values imperative for counsellors. Overall, it is important that students of social work have an understanding of values and practices that a client may accord to Islam; it would thereby be helpful for the worker to use this knowledge to better understand clients’ situations and facilitate successful interventions.

**Gender**

Educators should emphasize that individuals’ gender and social roles may be highly defined in Islamic societies (Florian and Mikulincer, 1993). Some Muslim clients may adhere to traditional gender roles that they or others may perceive to be in conflict with other and/or mainstream North American values (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2005). In many Muslim societies, husbands and wives do have equal worth but their roles, while complementary, may be quite different (Corbett cited in Hodge, 2005) and may be highly structured to promote harmony within both the family and larger community (Daneshpour, 1998). Men may be constructed to be the head of the household, with the associated financial and decision making responsibilities, while women may be socially constructed to appear to defer to men, and to take on more domestic and child care responsibilities (Al-Haj, 1987; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a). Gender roles may also influence an individual’s social freedom. Issues of acculturation may be particularly prescient, and inter-generational conflict may occur. A young daughter born in North America or Western Europe with parents from the old country may feel her behaviour to be more restricted. Her parents and other family members, on the other hand, may attempt to moderate their daughter’s behaviour because the behaviour reflects on their family (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2005). These gender roles may have a significant impact on a client’s situation. The perception of gender roles should be considered when deciding on an intervention strategy.

Many Muslim women can be an important resource to other clients, as they often tend to share information about programmes with other women. They can also introduce unique challenges. Some Muslim women may be particularly hard hit by the isolation that they may experience in North America.

In so many other cultures whether it’s from Latin America or Middle East or Africa, they have this extended family structure where people support each other. And in Canada, we know that has been the case in a number of years ago but it is evolving. It is more prominent, more in development, than it was—you know, the environment. For the women, it is the isolation and the absence of that support network that they are missing.

Social work students should note that there may be a stigma to seeking social or mental health services, and therefore some Muslim women may be less likely to ask for help from agencies (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a, 2000b). Some women may be more conservative than men, fearing the impact of interventions on their family, may not be as open with men around, and may feel pressured to be passive and act with humility as a result of the traditional role constructs used by the community.
Special consideration should be used when working with these Muslim women to ensure that interventions remain acceptable to the client. This may necessitate same-sex practitioners.

**Social Worker Skills**

As with much cross-cultural practice, students of social work who are expected to work with Muslim clients can benefit from developing certain practice skills that allow them to effectively interact with clients. Many of these skills involve demonstrating cultural sensitivity and understanding, particularly through listening and asking the right questions. This, of course, can be a beneficial skill with regards to working with clients from other backgrounds as well.

**Clinical Consideration**

Many agencies and practitioners intend to include cultural awareness and sensitivity in every aspect of their social service delivery system (Haynes et al., 1997; Weaver, 2005). Active listening is an important component for all clinical interactions, especially when working cross-culturally with any client, Muslim included. Students and practitioners should consider the context and background of the individual and avoid using a generic ‘recipe book’ approach with all Muslim clients, as they can come from vastly different backgrounds (Bradshaw and Graham, 2005). It is important to observe the client throughout the interaction and sense and adapt to their comfort level. Practitioners should attempt to understand the client’s perspective on a given topic, considering what will work best for them given their current situation and cultural values. Many of these practices may be foreign to a client, and many likewise may be perceived as a threat. Educators should emphasize with their students that, as practitioners, they should avoid reflecting biases and demonstrate respect for cultural diversity in their provision of services (Hodge, 2005). Flexibility is important, and services should be adapted when possible (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a; Nápoles-Springer et al., 2005). The best advice that many practitioners gave—and this, we think, would apply logically to practice with members of any religious, racial, or ethnic community—was to ask about fears, concerns, experiences, and values before you start your work with a client. This will garner trust as it conveys respect for unique cultural experience and expression.

Appreciating where clients are coming from and the difficulties that they may face, social workers can help by explaining the rationale of policies and procedures that may seem unusual, such as police checks, helping clients to complete forms, speaking the same language or arranging for an interpreter, and providing adaptable and flexible scheduling that takes into consideration client needs. Practitioners should try to understand their Muslim clients’ culture and religion and give them the opportunity to practise their religion, if they seek to do so, in whichever way they choose.
I’m working with this particular woman, and I’m giving her this type of feedback, and then right in the middle she has to break because she has to go to pray, or something like that, and what should I do? And so the response then would be, You’ve got to recognize that that’s part of her religion, that’s part of her culture, and you’ve got to respect it by giving her the time to go and do that. And also in your own respective agencies, if you are hiring people from that particular background, you have to create the space that will allow them to practise their religion because this is a country in which the Charter of Rights and Freedoms give us the opportunity to practise our religion, to practise our culture, so it’s recognition and acceptance of these individuals.

Understanding, appreciating, and facilitating the needs of such clients in regards to their customs, cultural influences, and spiritual needs encompass a large component of practising in a culturally sensitive manner.

Assessment

Cultural understanding and respect can help build positive rapport and trust. Language has been identified as a major barrier to immigrants’ access to services (Chan, 2000; Leung, 2000). Several of our respondents commented on the helpfulness of speaking the same language as a client, and that capacity’s influence upon positive rapport. With or without second or multi-language backgrounds, social workers can utilize an informed approach, working through limitations and establishing trust, although this may take some time. Practitioners can also increase client comfort by using a sense of familiarity and being active in the Muslim community (Bradshaw and Graham, 2005). Clients should be reassured about confidentiality, reducing the risk of stigmatization.

Educators can emphasize that casual ordinary conversation may be the best approach, particularly in the early stages of contact. When unsure, asking the client what is considered appropriate and respectful can help to demonstrate respect and prevent mishaps. When possible, it may be beneficial to enlist the help of a Muslim social worker or associate to facilitate communication (Arrendo et al., 1996; Kelly et al., 1996; Russell and White, 2001). Practitioners could usefully move slowly and ask appropriate questions, allowing clients to tell them what they need to know.

Ask. It will be better for you to ask before you start working with that specific person or family members. You know what are the things that you should refrain from and then once you know those, then you have the advantage of gaining their trust right away because they know that you respect some values that are very unique to them.

Professional Boundaries

Social workers often try to maintain clear professional boundaries, but this can be difficult when social crossovers occur that bring clients and social workers together in multiple settings. Understandably, some clients prefer to work with social workers who are from their community. Sharing personal information with such clients can
help to establish a positive relationship, and once these relationships have formed, they may need to be maintained until clients are established. However, educators should stress that working with clients from your own community can be problematic, and issues of boundaries may arise.

So I’m not comfortable you know, working with somebody that I have either worked with through the community. I know much about them but I try to refer them to somebody else who can work with them. It’s not very, I don’t think it’s not fair either because when the person comes to you, you already know too much from them about them from the community and I think you will work with them based on information that you have from outside.

Ethno-specific boundaries that social workers learn may have to be revised when working with some Muslim clients. Another risk is the perception of a perceived change in power relations, either within a family during the course of service provision, or power between worker and client. Some clients may not feel comfortable challenging service providers. Although it can be difficult, practitioners sometimes could seek to break down power differentials (Cohen, 1998; Hodge, 2005; Maiter et al., 2006). As one respondent pointed out:

I’m the power. I’ve got the power and you don’t. And a lot of clients feel that. Most clients coming in, because they are in need, are not comfortable challenging that—challenging the attitude, challenging the role. I find that environment is important too; I always like these homey touches, because a person walks in, and even if they don’t know you, you know that that person is feeling uncomfortable in a sterile setting.

Networking

Students should be informed that outreach in the community can help increase awareness of available services, and past clients may assist by sharing their experiences with other community members through informal social networks (Friedrich, 1999; Weine, 2000). Linking clients to various services and organizations can provide a significant degree of social support (Byng, 1998; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a; Hodge, 2005). Some circumstances may benefit from sharing a religiously-based connection with a Muslim client, and these connections may also enhance client trust. It is important to teach that service providers should be up front with the community, working with community members to build culturally and religiously sensitive prevention and intervention strategies. This can help to remove barriers to service access that may occur at the community level. Building good relationships between Muslim agencies and organizations can be very helpful, and practitioners can also network with other social workers to share knowledge, enhance cultural understanding, and disseminate information about effective practice strategies.

In the SCU, particularly, we have quite a few Muslim nurses and we have all different religions and cultures and we help each other. And people are very eager to help. And I would have to say that’s been my main resource—my colleagues. We’re very like that. Yeah, we’ve made real effort and also we have a human rights
and diversity officer here. So in the last three years we’ve really become acutely aware of serving the multicultural community more effectively.

**Cultural Understanding**

Students need to be aware of cultural barriers and must conduct themselves in an appropriate manner when beginning their practice. Understanding the significance of cultural dress and customs, the context of individuals, and how their context and culture influence their situation can assist in adopting an appropriate approach (Hodge, 2005). Since these attitudes may vary from one client to another, practitioners should not make assumptions about clients based on their ethnicity, race, religion, gender, or other parameters, and should use a flexible approach in learning the significance of different cultural customs and connotations, addressing barriers, and ultimately in learning the varying and variable dos and don’ts of different clients (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a; Dyche and Zayas, 2001; Bradshaw and Graham, 2005; Nápoles-Springer et al., 2005). Making an effort to provide more effective services to Muslim clients can help service providers to better understand and address their clients’ problems.

Okay, she is a Muslim so it does not mean that I can deny her or say that, “Oh, she may not want this” or “Oh, they don’t do this”. I just use it to enrich my knowledge so that I will provide her more sensitive, satisfying service. So that difference for me is a strength in my way of dealing—my knowledge of that fact is a strength for me to give her a more better service.

**Shared Experience**

Another theme that can be asserted by educators is ‘shared’ experience. Having the same gender as a Muslim client, for instance, may help to develop and sustain rapport (Mass and Al-Krenawi, 1994). Sharing cultural values may also help. When social workers do not share the same culture as their clients, working with someone who can act as a cultural interpreter may be beneficial (Arrendo et al., 1996; Kelly et al., 1996; Russell and White, 2001). When possible, knowledge of a client’s language is ideal, making the practitioner more approachable, and communication richer. Having information about Islam and its customs and understanding religious sensitivities may also be helpful, as is sharing relevant experiences such as living as an immigrant or refugee. Using shared phrases from the client’s language and using cultural knowledge along with proper counselling skills can enhance interactions and client comfort. As several of our informants pointed out, when the practitioner shares a language and cultural values with a client, perceived understanding and client trust are often enhanced and links are formed between client and practitioner.

I always greet them in a Muslim manner so I am giving them the message that okay, I’m from your background, your culture, so then they have the option of going in the traditional way and then my second question was—she spoke—and
then I kind of felt that she may be more fluent in her own mother tongue so I asked her the question did she want to talk to me in English or would she prefer to talk to me in Urdu?

Respect

Perhaps most important of all: demonstrating respect for Muslim clients and their cultural values is crucial. The literature addresses respect in relation to gender issues in intervention strategies, respecting cultural dress codes by covering up when working with certain Muslim groups, even running through scenarios to enhance understanding and respect for cultural differences (Kelly et al., 1996; Hodge, 2005). So many facets happen concurrently; as one of our informants remarked:

We did play a game for between staff understanding the social and psychology of the youth whether it could be the body language or the body posture, the rhythm of their language, semantics, the proximity of how far you guys stand from each other. A lot of playing games like that. Even the posture. In some cultures, it’s okay to have a ______ some cultures it’s not. In some cultures it’s okay to talk about your family in the first minutes, “How’s your wife? How’s your ______?” And then get down into business. So they are ______.

Conclusions

Upon graduation, social workers should be knowledgeable about different cultural traditions—and graduate with a sensitivity to be life-long learners of culture. In this way they may make fewer cultural mistakes and demonstrate enhanced cultural sensitivity. Social work involves value systems and the ever-present human factor, along with understanding cultural customs, such as traditional dress and mannerisms, in effect allowing social workers to determine how best to interact with their clients. It is also important that social workers understand the religious concepts that are a part of their clients’ lives. Learning about and being involved in the Muslim community can help to enhance cultural understanding. Knowing about the background, customs, and lifestyle of various cultural groups makes for a better counsellor, one that is better equipped to understand and help resolve the problems that some Muslim clients face. Social work education can incorporate the cultural education needed to make this a reality for more social workers in North America. One of our informants summed it up as follows:

For any counsellor services, it is an asset for any counsellor to know the background of various cultures, which make you a better counsellor if you know the cultural, religious background of a client, and their customs, their lifestyle in their own society. So that makes any social worker more equipped to help them and more able to understand their problem. You may have good academic training, but if you are not aware of the client’s cultural background and social background, where they are coming from, so that knowledge gives you a very good tool to resolve their problem. And to guide them.
More generally, social service work with some Muslim people needs to be adapted to varying Muslim values, rather than added as a graft upon prevailing social work knowledge (Devore and Schlesinger, 1996). As a starting point, this can occur in three ways. First, social workers and students of social work should be familiar with the basic beliefs, values and rituals of Islam as it is practised in the client’s milieu. Ultimately, social work theory is best incorporated not just within individual practitioners and what they do; nor the agencies in which they work. The biggest objective social work has is to modify its knowledge base such that changing cultural adaptations can occur effectively. This article sheds light on some important aspects in this regard, which are often overlooked in mainstream social work curriculums. While the issue of dealing with second and third generations of Muslim immigrants is important, such analysis is well beyond the scope of this paper and is certainly worthy of future research. Future research might also develop a second, related area of inquiry: the myriad processes in which social workers could learn from the client the relative significance of Muslim religion and culture, and the manner in which these personal constructions could be integrated into a helping relationship. In all instances, social work practice enters into a still richer sense of the depth and the breadth of the Muslim human condition.

While this study was aimed specifically at working with Muslim clients, the experiential-phenomenological model suggested here for culturally competent multicultural practice can of course be applied to other cultural groups as well. Many cultural groups traditionally have strong opinions regarding gender roles, the role of the immediate and extended family, or the role of religious practices and rituals in their lives. It is always helpful to familiarize one’s self with the client’s group’s cultural values, constantly bearing in mind the client’s input and refraining from presenting the practitioner as an expert rather than a learner.

Notes

[1] Selection was restricted to within agencies or among practitioners that have an explicitly Muslim focus and/or whose clients are over 70% Muslim in background.

[2] Suitable sources that can be used for this purpose include John L. Esposito’s Islam: The Straight Path (1988), as well as Chapters 12–14 in Theodore M. Ludwig’s The Sacred Paths of the West (2006).

References


