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Ethnic Sensitive Social Work Practice: The State of the Art

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The social work literature of the past ten years has paid increasing attention to the ideological, theoretical and practice issues related to ethnic sensitive practice. Major focus has been on the life styles, needs and oppression of people of color, with minimal attention paid to other ethnic groups. A literature focused on adapting prevailing practice modalities to work with diverse groups is beginning to emerge.

In the preface to the first edition of *Ethnic Sensitive Social Work Practice* (1981) we suggested that the time had arrived when social work could comfortably integrate the profession's long standing commitment to the uniqueness of individuals with knowledge about ethnic and class related response. We also suggested then that as a result of the ferment of the 60's social work was finally paying more attention to poverty, to the liberation struggles of various groups and to how minority status, ethnic group membership, and social class status affect problem generation and resolution. The title of the book seemed to strike a cord. Soon after its publication the term ethnic sensitive social work practice quickly came to be used by a broad spectrum of social workers who seemed to be in agreement with the perspective implied by the term—that social work must be mindful of the effect of ethnic group membership on the problems people experience.

It was no longer possible to ignore these issues as a new convergence of forces compelled attention. Among the factors that emerged in the wake of the liberation movements of the sixties was recognition that pluralistic perspectives, not the
ideology of the melting pot were a more realistic reflection of the American experience. This sense was reinforced with the 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 which raised earlier immigration ceilings and gave priority to those joining families and those with particular job skills. Large numbers of people came from Asia, and Latin America, as well as the Middle East and the then Soviet Union. For all of these reasons the time had arrived for increased social work attention to related issues.

More attention has been paid. It is time to review, to critique, to analyze. This paper represents an effort at such appraisal. Our aim is to examine the state of the art of ethnic sensitive practice. We draw on our own fifteen year immersion in this work and on diverse material in the literature.

Major sources are the several books on ethnic sensitive, and cultural and minority practice published in the last 10 to fifteen years, as well as related materials found in some of the leading social work journals between 1983 and 1993. The journals selected were Social Work, Social Service Review, Social Casework/Families in Society, and Health and Social Work. Select material from the Journal of Multicultural Social Work, a new journal specifically devoted to the matters of interest here was also considered.

Our examination includes the definitions of ethnic groups, minority groups, people of color, race, social class and culture; a review of some of the major theories and concepts that have been introduced; and synthesis of reviews of the literature carried out by others as well as by us.

Summary and analysis of the various practice approaches and interventive strategies conclude the work.

Definitions and Definitional Issues

The issues subsumed under the rubric of ethnic sensitive social work practice are often intense, affectively charged and subject to considerable debate and disagreement. For these reasons, it is critical that we begin by systematic examination of the most commonly used terms.
Ethnic Groups and Ethnicity

Most definitions of ethnic groups focus on a number of themes, including a common religion, culture, physical appearance or some combination of these. Gordon (1988) defines an ethnic group as

a population entity which considers itself to have a common historical ancestry and identity—a sense of peoplehood, of constituting a 'people'—and is so regarded by others. It may be co-extensive with a particular nation, or it may be a sub population within a nation. It may be based on a common religion, a common language, a common national background, or a common racial ancestry or frequency, or some combination of several of these factors (p. 129)

Culture

Culture is a commonly used concept used to refer to the fact that human groups differ in the way they structure their behavior, in their world view, in their concept of the essential nature of the human condition and how they view the rhythms and patterns of life.

Distinctions Between Culture and Ethnicity

In our view cultural phenomena are an integral but not the only component of the ethnic experience. Brookins points to the distinction.

Ethnicity refers to group membership in which the defining feature is the characteristic of shared unique cultural traditions and a heritage that spans across generations. Membership in an ethnic group provides the cultural identity and lens through which the developing child comes to understand and act upon prescribed values, norms and social behavior. (Brookins, 1993, p. 1057)

Minority Groups and Minorities

The term “minority” has been used to identify people who tend to be located “at the lowest end of the spectrum of power and advantage”. (Hopps, 1983, p. 77) A combination of racism and poverty sets apart many African Americans, Native Americans, Native Alaskans, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans.
(Hopps, 1982) suggests that the term minority has come to be used to refer to people other than members of ethnic groups that are especially oppressed, and proposes that the terms "people of color" or "minorities of color" more accurately describe the persons whose lives are being considered.

Some have questioned the use of the term ethnic groups to refer to members of minority groups. Jaynes and Williams (1989) reject the view that African Americans constitute an ethnic group in the same way as do people of European origin. They suggest the "uniqueness of race as an irreducible category has emerged from the debate". (p 56) We disagree, and suggest that a review of the classic definition of an ethnic group points to the contrary. Nevertheless, political and other considerations may persuade representatives of different groups to use terms which more accurately reflect their sense of themselves and the issues of importance to them. (Asamoah et. al., 1991)

Race

It is difficult to define "race" in objective terms since the term has a "long and tortuous history" (Jaynes and Williams, 1989 p 565). They point out that "differences in skin color, type of hair and facial features that are biologically trivial have been used as markers for ascribing great differences in power and privilege." (p 565) They use the term as "a social construct that relies on common understandings and self definition rather than scientific criteria" (p. 566).

Oppression

The dictionary (Webster, 1984) defines oppression as "keeping down by cruel, or unjust use of power or authority." In this context, it is oppression of minority groups that is the focus of attention.

Diversity

The terms diversity and difference are often used as being synonymous. Focus is on dissimilarity and on variety. Here the term diversity is used in reference to the various populations that live in this country, understanding that many people from
many lands and cultures live in the United States in an exciting, heterogeneous context.

In practice, social workers need to recognize the joy and beauty of diversity while struggling to eliminate oppression.

Ethnic Sensitive Social Work Practice

The term “ethnic sensitive social work practice” once introduced came to be used by social workers when referring in a broad, general sense to practice that is mindful of the effects of ethnic and minority group membership in social functioning and seeks to incorporate this understanding into practice. Used this way, the term is not limited to any single or particular definition or approach. Longres (1991) exemplifies this use of the term when he suggests that “ethnic sensitive models . . . are proliferating” (p 55). He also suggests that for the most part these models emphasize differences in cultural norms.

There is, of course the multifaceted approach to ethnic sensitive practice, with specific definitions, theoretical formulations and practice approaches introduced by the present authors and variously considered in this paper.

Another use of the term has been introduced by McMahon and Allen-Meares (1992). In the effort to answer the question “is social work racist?” these authors reviewed segments of the social work literature and concluded that “ethnic-sensitive practice ultimately focuses on change in the social worker, not the client nor the client’s external conditions. Thus, by itself, without regard for client’s social and economic contexts, ethnic sensitive practice reinforces the racist conditions that oppress clients”. This is a distortion of the approach introduced initially by the present authors and subsequently reiterated (Devore and Schlesinger, 1981, 1987, 1991) Emphasis on simultaneous attention to psychological and systems change strategies were and remain an integral focus of the approach. Our own review of the literature surfaced no exclusive focus on “changing” the social worker at the expense of systems change, nor have other reviews identified such a thrust.
Ideological, Theoretical and Conceptual Formulations

Ideological Considerations

Theoretical/conceptual as well as ideological formulations have been introduced as the basis for ethnic sensitive practice. Lister (1987) suggests a distinction between an ethnocultural focus on ethnic group values, history, family structure and family functions related to ethnocultural identification, and a minority perspective focused on racism, powerlessness, prejudice, discrimination and other types of oppression.

In their critique of the minority perspective Montiel and Wong (1983) suggest the perspective represents a reaction by minority persons to “the assault of racist institutions” (p.112) They contend however, that the grievances are presented in an “ad hoc” fashion, don’t explain the structural sources of minority life and don’t deal adequately with theories of racism. Further, there is no theoretical framework for analyzing a number of issues facing minorities, including the consequences of acculturation, assimilation and adoption of positions motivated by individual pursuit of self interest.

Our analysis, based largely on the review of the literature found in subsequent sections of this paper, suggests that the profession has responded to earlier criticism of neglect of minority issues by focusing largely on issues arising out of a minority perspective. Considerably less attention has been paid to an ethnocultural perspective, especially in respect to persons currently not defined as minorities. The major exception is the work of the present authors. (Devore & Schlesinger, 1981, 1987, 1991)

The Curriculum Policy Statements of the Council on Social Work Education (1984, 1992) have contributed to this ideological stance. BSW and MSW programs have had to include materials on people of color since the 1970’s. This position is reaffirmed in the most recent Curriculum Policy Statement adopted in July 1992. Schools have more choice about which other groups on which to focus-suggesting that they be selected on the basis of their relevance to any particular program’s mission.

Chau (1991) suggests that three ideological perspectives have shaped social work’s response to minority concerns: 1) the
cultural deficit perspective which views as deviant any variations of cultural patterns from mainstream norms; 2) the minority perspective which has resulted in a shift in social work practice toward affirmative action and social change strategies and 3) the ethnocultural perspective. Longres' (1991) critique of prevailing models bridges ideological and theoretical perspectives. In his view many of the emerging models have within them the themes of culture and cultural differences. This focus is more appropriate for work with recent immigrants than minority group persons long resident in this country who think and act in accord with the core value system. Social workers should pay more attention to the subordinate position of minority persons and the negative consequences than to their cultural attributes. Helping minority clients means changing stratification systems.

Theoretical Perspectives

Diverse theoretical perspectives—from sociology, anthropology, social psychology and political theory have variously focused on individual behavior, on the function of groups and social systems and on relationships between diverse groups. Lum (1992) points to concepts of race, class, ethnicity and power; therapeutic approaches with minority families, gender, perspectives on mental health and minority perspectives on human behavior and the social environment. Pinderhughes (1989) shows how power, ethnicity and race contribute to problems and how understanding their effects and interplay can contribute to effective practice.

The Dual Perspective The concept of the dual perspective (Norton 1978) grew out of the effort of the Council on Social Work Education to develop conceptualizations that would facilitate the preparation of students to provide effective services to minority clients. The concept derives from the view that all people are embedded in two systems—the dominant or sustaining system which is the source of power, economic resources and status, and the nurturing system consisting of the social environment of family and community. The individual sense of
identity is developed in the nurturing system. Drawing on socialization theory, Norton suggests that the sense of self is developed via a process Mead described as taking on the attitude of the wider society, the generalized other, through role taking. Through this process children discover that "the roles belong to their own nature . . ." (p 4) This attitude of the generalized other gives unity of self to individuals as they incorporate society's responses and react accordingly. Drawing on the experience in the nurturing system, the alternative generalized other can serve to enforce positive self images and serve as a buffer against negative self images which minority persons may develop if they internalize negative societal images. Norton also used the concept to delineate a process whereby social workers consciously and systematically perceive the values and attitudes of the larger social system with those of the client's immediate system. An important issue revolves around the degree of incongruence between the societal and the client's system. Given rejection of basic elements of minority client systems, it is difficult for minority clients to achieve congruence. Recognizing this facilitates increased awareness by social workers of the points of conflict between minority clients and that of the larger society, as well as highlighting sources of social structural inequity.

De Hoyos, De Hoyos and Anderson (1986) suggest that though considered important, analysts have in fact made limited use of the dual perspective. Their review of the literature points rather to a focus on cultural dissonance and institutional racism. Norton has also begun to reconsider the dual perspective (Norton, 1993) and suggests the emphasis on difference may become pejorative. A focus on culture, viewed as a set of integrating mechanisms may serve to provide the basis for understanding differences while retaining a perspective that values human commonalities.

Biculturalism Ho (1987) suggests that all members of minority groups are part of two cultures and participate in two cultural systems. Two sets of behavior are often required involving distinct ways of coping with tasks and expectations.

Categorical and Transactional Concepts of Ethnicity Green (1982) introduced the categorical and the transactional concepts
of ethnicity. The former emphasizes ethnic specific traits and cultural content, and in his view "pigeonholes" people without explaining the basis of the differences. The transactional perspective focuses on means by which people maintain their sense of cultural distinctiveness in cross cultural encounters. Identified with Barth (1969, cited in Green 1982) the focus is on group boundaries using selected cultural traits as criteria or markers of exclusion.

Cultural content—ceremonies, technology, language, religion—serves a symbolic function separating groups from one another. Transactional analysis is concerned with lines of separation, their management and ritualization. The ways in which distinctiveness is defended, asserted, preserved or abandoned is the "stuff of ethnic identity". There are identifiable consequences that follow from considering the importance of interaction across group boundaries as one of the defining characteristics of ethnicity. Since these relationships are often ritualized, one can predict behavior without having to learn fully of one another's culture.

The Ethnic Reality The conceptual base of the model of ethnic sensitive practice introduced by the present authors (Devore & Schlesinger, 1981, 1986, 1987, 1991) derives from social stratification theory, specifically, Gordon's analysis (1964) of the relative impact of social class and ethnic group membership on social life. Although he attributed primary importance to social class as a determinant of the basic conditions of life, he observed major differences in outlook and orientation between persons occupying the same class position. Gordon attributed these differences to ethnicity and coined the term "ethclass" to refer to the point of intersection between social class and ethnicity. We have suggested that the unique configuration generated by this intersect be termed the ethnic reality or ethclass in action.

This focus on the interplay between social class and ethnicity allows us to locate groups and individuals within the social structure while facilitating analysis of at least two critical structural realities—class and ethnic group membership. Membership in one of the major social class strata provides ready clues
about the socioeconomic circumstances of individuals while the intersect suggests that a unique configuration is formed when the two factors are joined.

Adams and Schlesinger (1988) suggest that the stratification structure is a key component of the sustaining system identified by Norton (1978) and Chestang (1976.) The congruence between the two models has been noted by Chau (1991) who suggests that the "two concepts picture the unique condition of minority individuals very well". We, consider the analysis to be applicable to ethnic and minority groups. The concept of the ethnic reality calls attention to group history with respect to structural sources of oppression and discrimination, and to values concerning such matters as the respective importance attached to gender roles, how the elderly are to be cared for and the ways in which religious teachings are translated into dictums for daily living.

Minority Values and Theory  Lum (1986, 1992) considers the congruence and difference between traditional social work and minority values. Traditional social work values emphasize individual dignity and uniqueness, self determination and resource accessibility. Individual rights and freedom are considered most important. Minority values are more likely to stress collective orientations, including emphasis on family obligation and the dependence of family members on one another, ethnic group identity and "metaphysical harmony in nature or religion".

According to Lum, minority persons in the United States share values that include the importance of subordinating the needs of the individual to those of the family, and viewing the family as the primary source of relationships. The family including the extended family is "the central point of reference and place of refuge" (p 408). The degree of adherence to these tenets varies with the degree of acculturation. The importance of religious institutions in sustaining various minority groups through adverse social stress related to their low status is noted.

Minority knowledge refers to information, awareness and understanding of the minority situational experience. Minority theory "refines minority knowledge in a series of formulated general principles that explain these phenomena systematically."
The Sociocultural Approach  
De Hoyos, De Hoyos and Anderson (1986) suggest that two sociocultural perspectives have dominated the literature—cultural dissonance and institutional racism. The first emphasizes problems that arise out of cultural difference, the second focuses on minority problems in terms of discrimination practiced in social structures. They contend that society can be viewed as a system and that values determine social organization, that systems seek to maximize success and minimize failure and that people conform to the extent that they feel rewarded as they perform their roles within systems. Social dislocation occurs when any group is prevented from the opportunity to occupy rewarding roles. Extended delay results in the group's being blocked leading to social and cultural dislocation.

Literature Review

Synthesis of Prior Reviews

There have been a number of reviews of the social work literature focused on attention to minority and ethnic issues. McMahon and Allen-Meares' review (1992) covered articles on minority issues and persons published in four major journals during the 1980's. They concluded that the total relative to other subject matter was small. Based on their operationalization of concepts they concluded that most of the articles recommended an"individualistic, interventive practice that...helps the client adapt to an oppressive environment". (p 537) A reluctance to undertake social action with a macro focus, was noted and in their view "...the literature portrays the social work profession as naive and superficial in its antiracist practice". They found greater attention to developing social worker's ethnic and cultural awareness than on the social and economic contexts in which minority persons live. It is their contention that the focus on ethnic sensitivity is essentially racist.

Lum (1992) examined over 20 social work practice texts written between 1970 and 1990. Based on his tally of the amount of ethnic/minority content found he concluded that minimal attention has been paid to related issues by the leading social work practice theorists. His review of three major social work journals published during the same period revealed only slightly more attention than in the texts.
**The Present Review** In our review we focused on identifying emerging issues. Several were readily identified. One was attention to the "ethnic reality" of these groups—that is an attempt to capture their lives, needs and coping styles. Another we term the focus on empowerment/advocacy/social action/social policy issues. The nature of attention to interventive issues was also of interest. During the ten year period covered by our review, there was a focus on minority groups or people of color, with minimal attention given to any other ethnic groups. The group receiving the most attention was African Americans, followed next by Latinos and then Asians.

Such attention as was paid to non minority groups was often by way of comparison with the major groups of interest. Included here are occasional references to Jewish, Italian, Greek, and Irish people, and persons from Africa. As best as we could establish there were no articles on people from Japan, the Middle East or the large numbers of countries in Eastern and Western Europe. The large numbers of recent immigrants from Latin and Central America are receiving scant attention.

No single group or topic area was considered in depth. Rather, the articles ranged over a wide subject matter. Consequently it is not possible to present any meaningful syntheses. Rather, we limit ourselves to providing an overview of the groups and issues considered.  

**Focus on the Ethnic Reality**

**African Americans** Explicit in almost all of the work was recognition of the oppression experienced by African American people, and how that oppression impacts on the specific issue under consideration. Examination of the life of the African American elderly was of considerable interest and included their patterns of informal supports (Taylor & Chatters, 1986); comparison of the volunteer service patterns of white and Black elders, (Morrow-Hovele, Lott & Ozawa, 1990); the impact of labor force transformation (Crawley, 1992); service use (Richardson, 1992); and grandmotherhood (Timberlake & Chipungu 1992). Also addressed were perspectives on depression among Black Americans (Fellin, 1989), while Biegel, Magaziner and
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Other issues addressed were a perspective on African American women and birth control (Gould, 1984) and single Black mothers. (Seaborn-Thompson & Peebles-Wilkins, 1992). There was also attention to the self image and the roles of African American fathers (Christmon, 1990; McAdoo, 1991); and battered Black women (Coley and Beckett, 1988).

**Latinos** 
Articles focused on Mexican Americans made reference to value differences between Anglos and members of this groups. One compared the home and work responsibilities of Anglo and Mexican women (Marlow, 1990); another social science concepts used to understand the situation of Mexican Americans. (Padilla, 1990). Rothman, Gant and Hand (1985) analyzed the characteristics of Mexican American family culture. The health needs of Hispanic children and adults were reviewed by Guendelman (1985); and De La Rosa (1989) as were the nature of support systems of Puerto Ricans (De La Rosa, 1988). The relationship between Hispanic culture and home care of people with Alzheimer's disease was considered. (Cox & Monk, 1993) as were “cultural dissonance and AIDS (Bok & Morales, 1992). Attention was also paid to “Hispanic” families in poverty (Aponte, 1993). The relationship between biculturalism and mental health among Cuban Americans was of interest (Gomez, 1990), as was the general issues of understanding Cuban immigrants from a cultural perspective (Queralt, 1984). The risks for mental health problems of pregnant Hispanic women are pointed out by Zoyas and Busch-Rossnagelll (1992).

**Asian Americans** 
Since many of the persons classified as Asian came to the United States as refugees, a number of the works focused on adaptation to the United States. Interest was focused on acculturation among Vietnamese refugees, (Matsuoka, 1990), on Vietnamese youth in foster care (Mortland and Egan, 1987) on adaptation issues facing elderly Chinese persons (Cheung, 1986) and on cultural factors in casework with Chinese Americans (Ryan, 1985). Also of interest was the situation of
Cambodian refugees (Bromley, 1985) psychological traumas and depression in a sample of Vietnamese people (Train, 1993), sudden unexplained death among some Southeast Asian refugees (Petzold, 1991) and on how Buddhism functions as a support system for Southeast Asian refugees. (Canda and Phaobtong, 1992).

Segal (1991) considers key attributes of Asian Indians and the intergenerational problems they generate. An issue of concern to some Asian Americans, the view held by many, that they constitute a model minority with few needs is considered by Crystal (1989).

**Native Americans** Articles on Native Americans focused on a number of issues including distinct cultural values, how these differ from "Anglo" culture, and how these in turn affect problem generation and solution. Some examples are the relationships between anglo concepts, Indian reality and juvenile delinquency (Robbins, 1984); the implications of Indian values for casework intervention (DuBray, 1985), implications of cultural precepts for child welfare practice (Cross, 1986) and the utility of Durkheimian analysis in understanding suicide among Native Americans. (Davenport and Davenport, 1987).

**West Indian People** A literature is beginning to emerge about persons who come to the United States from the Caribbean area. Several of the articles focused on this population group incorporated a focus on the ethnic reality with treatment implications. Thrasher and Anderson (1988) focused on culture specific problems in dealing with such issues as child abuse and the differential cultural interpretation while Sewell-Coker, Hamilton-Collins and Fein (1985) point to conflicting value assumptions, especially in regard to parent child relationships that must be understood in programs intended to help these families.

**Policy, Empowerment, Advocacy/Social Action**

The work on policy, empowerment, advocacy and social action ranged over a number of issues. Examples are empowering women of color (Gutierrez, 1990) and, patterns of welfare spending that impact negatively or positively on minority persons (Ozawa, 1986; Sandefeur & Pahari, 1989). Black single
mothers in poverty were the focus of attention (Jackson, 1983) as were minority children and the educational system (Meares, 1990; Williams 1990) and in the welfare system (Hogan and Siu, 1988). Social welfare spending and AFDC were the focus of work by Caputo (1993). Access to the profession was an issue with the focus on minority recruitment (Berger, 1989). Interven-
tive approaches to service development were an issue that is touched on in the section on intervention.

**Intervention**

Discussion of ethnic sensitive approaches to intervention took essentially two forms. In almost all of the articles where the major focus was on description and analysis of the ethnic reality there was also some-albeit often limited-attention paid to the implications for intervention. In a small number, the primary focus was on applying knowledge about the ethnic reality to developing ethnic sensitive interventive approaches and strategies with different groups and problem areas.

The limitations of a review article do not allow for a detailed review or synthesis of a number of the approaches proposed. Most fall within what has elsewhere been termed “adaptation of strategies to the ethnic reality”; (see Devore & Schlesinger, 1991) that is drawing on basic social work theories and interventive approaches, on understanding of the coping styles of different people, and integrating these two types of understanding in modifying or expanding strategies and skills. A few examples are illustrative.

of empowerment are central to the work of Hirayama & Cetin-
gok (1988) in the approach they propose for work with Asian
immigrants, while Hardy-Fanta focused on knowledge of cul-
tural and process issues as essential to a comprehensive group
service in the Hispanic community. Weiss and Parish consider
culturally appropriate methods of crisis counseling in working
with Indochinese refugees. Timberlake and Cook (1984) suggest
strategies for social work with Vietnamese refugees. Respect for
the rights of self determination and community needs underpin
the model of practice for work with Black urban youth gangs
focus on culturally syntonic strategies used in assessing service
needs of the Hispanic community. Icard and Traunstaine (1987)
show how negative attitudes to homosexuals and racism can
have impact on efforts to work with Black, gay, alcoholic men.
They propose a series of highly targeted intervention strategies.
Kelly, McKay and Nelson (1985) bring an ecological perspective
to bear on Indian agency development.

The results of this review can be summarized in a num-
ber of way. The overwhelming focus on people of color has
already been noted, as has the fact that coverage spanned a
broad spectrum of areas with limited in depth exploration of
any one area. The notable exception was a focus on adop-
tion and concerns raised about transracial adoption. (eg An-
dujo, 1988) Feigelman and Silverman, 1984; McRoy, Zurcher
and Lauderdale, 1984; Rodriguez and Meyer, 1990; and Rosen-
thal, Groze and Curiel, 1990). Review of the ethnic reality of
various groups far exceeded the urgent need for social work-
ers to develop practice knowledge and interventive approaches
based on understanding the ethnic reality of various groups.
We share the observation made by McMahon and Meares (1992)
that there were a relatively small number of articles focused on
issues of social policy, advocacy, social action, empowerment
and systems change. A number of general principles emerge
from this review.

These are summarized in a later section of this paper in the
section titled “Practice Skills and Strategies”
Practice Approaches

A number of models of ethnic sensitive approaches to practice have been developed.

Minority Social Work Practice

Lum (1896, 1992) introduced this form of practice. He suggests that discrimination experienced by people of color calls for approaches that are especially sensitive to ethnic and cultural environments. The primary focus is to improve the quality of psychosocial functioning as the minority person interacts with the social situation". (p 6) The target groups are people of color-African American, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans.

The Framework for Minority Practice  There are four categories within the framework for ethnic minority social work: 1) practice process stages; 2) worker-system practice issues; 3) client-system practice issues and 4) worker-client tasks. Process stages focus on the step by step sequence of client and worker movement in the helping process. Client and worker system issues include both those relevant to all clients and workers and those especially pertinent to minority clients. Many minority persons may be distrustful, or have shame about seeking assistance. Ethnic and minority background may provide clues to understanding the client, and determining degree of acculturation is most important.

Practice Model Based on Cultural Awareness

Green suggests that social workers assume an important role as boundary mediators because of the role they play in communication of information and the regulation of resources. He identifies four modes of social work intervention: 1) advocacy because of the inherent conflict between minority and dominant groups; 2) counseling—although culturally sensitive counseling needs to be further developed; 3) a regulator role—one that is often viewed negatively by ethnic community leaders; an example is the removal of Native American children from their homes following allegations of abuse; and 4) the broker role in which in which social workers attempt to redress past failures
of established social service organizations in meeting the needs of minority clients.

Green’s model of help seeking behavior focuses on culturally based differences in perceiving and experiencing stress; language and how it crystallizes experience and the social as well as personal experience of a problem. There is emphasis on acknowledging the problem as it is experienced by the client, the way language is used to label a problem, the availability of indigenous helping resources and client oriented criteria for deciding whether a satisfactory resolution has been reached. Also emphasized is the notion of “ethnic competence” which refers to a high level of cultural awareness of others involving more than the usual attributes associated with social worker client relationships. It is a way of functioning that is consonant with the behavior of members of distinct ethnic groups.

A Paradigm for Community Work with People of Color

While the literature related to ethnic sensitive practice with individuals, families and groups has been developing, little has been contributed in relation to work with communities. Rivera and Erlich’s paradigm (1992) for organizing with people of color contributed to this area of practice.

These authors suggest that “benign or belligerent neglect” has been part of the history of communities of color in relation to the need to mobilize available skills and extend limited resources. The classic models of community practice—locality development, social planning, and social action are essentially “color blind” and can serve only as a foundation for intervention strategies to be used in communities of color. Work in each of these communities is not the same. The models need to be buttressed with consideration of 1) the uniqueness of people of color; 2) the implication of the role played in the various communities of kinship, their social systems, power and leadership networks, religion and language and 3) the process of empowerment.

The authors present a profile of a community organizer who is seen as a person of racial and cultural identity similar to that of the community. The person is expected to be familiar with
the community customs, traditions, language-including slang, social networks and community values.

Community intervention is seen as having three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary, each with increasing intensity and influence. The primary level is the most intimate requiring a worker with full ethnic solidarity with the community. The secondary level is one step removed from the primary and consists of contact and influence. While sharing the same language is helpful this is not mandatory. The organizer functions as a liaison with the outside community and institutions and may serve as resource with expertise based on the unique cultural characteristics of the community. Tertiary tasks may be accomplished by an "outsider" working for the common interests of the community. Cultural or racial identity is not a requirement. The work is with outside infrastructures in roles of advocate and broker for the community of color.

The Model of Ethnic Sensitive Practice

Here, focus is on the approach to practice introduced by the present authors in several of our works (Devore & Schlesinger, 1981, 1987, 1991)

We take the position that all people are members of ethnic groups and have experienced ethnic socialization processes—whether in single or dual or multi ethnic households. Major elements of being are affected by ethnic group membership. For this reason social workers need to understand and attend to ethnic related dispositions of all peoples just as they need to understand other elements of human functioning. The distinction between oppression and diversity, made earlier in the section on "definitional issues" calls attention to these differences and points to social workers' obligation to be mindful of both, as well as the special obligation to work to eliminate and reduce the bases of oppression. The distinction between minority groups and ethnic groups as earlier defined is of special importance in this approach to practice.

Basic Assumptions  are 1) individual and collective history have bearing on problem generation and solution; 2) the present is
most important; 3) non conscious phenomena affect functioning while the present reality is most important in attending to problems; and 4) ethnicity is a source of cohesion, identity and strength, as well as strain, discordance and strife.

The Layers of Understanding  Ethnic sensitive practice as defined here presents no distinctive model or approaches to practice; rather the position is taken that the understandings and approaches developed can and must be incorporated into the diverse approaches to practice. The "Layers of Understanding" is a concept that suggests that knowledge, value and skill, including the specialized knowledge and skills of ethnic sensitive approaches are the essential ingredients of professional practice. The layers are: 1) social work values; 2) knowledge of human behavior; 3) knowledge and skill in understanding and effecting changes in social welfare policies and services, especially those racist and other structural impediments to effective service delivery; 4) self awareness with emphasis on "who am I in the ethnic sense?"; 5) the impact of the ethnic reality on all people with special attention to those ethnic groups that are particular victims of racism and poverty; 6) the route to the social worker—a conceptualization of the paths to social work services that recognizes that members of oppressed minority groups are most likely to encounter social workers via coercive routes to service such as the courts and the schools.

Practice Principles and Interventive Approaches

Any theoretical or ideological approach ultimately derives its importance from its utility for our daily work. Social work has evolved an extensive repertoire of strategies; it was important to assess whether various analysts found these to be compatible with the various positions that have been advanced. It was also important to determine whether there is need for entirely new approaches or whether ethnic sensitive principles can be incorporated into existing perspectives.

Practice Principles  Based on the present review it is clear that social work practice must be based on clear knowledge of how ethnicity and social class and oppression contribute to individual and group identity, to disposition to life's tasks, to coping
styles and to the constellation of problems people experience. These factors, joined with individual development, and genetic and physiological disposition contribute to the development of personality structure and group life. Equally important is recognition of the fact that inequity is often built into the very service delivery structure intended to provide services. Although a number of analysts (eg-McMahon-Allan-Meares; Longres) find that social work’s attention to oppression remains wanting, this theme was nevertheless echoed in much of the work.

Social work has long relied on both social structural and psychological explanations of behavior; that these trends are reflected in the analysis of issues related to ethnic sensitive practice is to be expected. More and more we have come to understand the indivisibility of structural and psychological forces. (eg Germain & Gitterman, 1980) Out of this view it naturally follows that practice principles that stress simultaneous attention to individual and systemic concerns are congruent with attention to class and ethnicity and culture. We have identified a number of social work models to be most consonant with the various ways in which ethnic-sensitive practice is defined. They include the problem solving models, the structural model, select segments of task centered practice, ecological models and institutional change models.

Practi ce Skills and Strategies

A review of the skills, strategies and interventive repertoires that long dominated the literature suggests that the basic tenets were developed as if service was to be provided primarily to highly educated persons immersed in middle class culture and values. Any basic social work practice text highlights the importance of privacy, of confidentiality, and the primacy of individual over collective interests. The suggestion is also conveyed that trust and comfort can be readily generated—with the provision of a relaxed atmosphere, respect, use of eye contact and high levels of empathy.

Even the most cursory review of the history of many of this country’s ethnic, minority and social class groups point to the fact that many people are not immersed in what may be called the “middle class vision”. Involvement in the kind of
relationships offered by social workers—the very process of needing help—is painful and anathema to many people. The kind of intimacy and ready comfort generated by the worker who “maintains an open posture” goes counter to the interactional style expected when super and subordinates meet. And there is little question that many people envision the relationship between the social worker and client as mandatory and perhaps coercive.7

This review of the practice literature suggests a range of approaches to modifying prototypical behavioral repertoires that are in keeping with the needs and disposition of the persons to whom service is provided. It is not possible or appropriate to delineate these precisely, for it is the very process of adaptation as we work with clients one to one, or as we aim to alter negative institutional and agency contexts that is at the core of ethnic sensitive practice. Nevertheless, a series of “ethnic sensitive adaptations have been suggested:

1. Recognizing the primacy of institutional and systemic forces in generating client problems, especially when working with oppressed people, and engaging in professional intervention to minimize that oppression.

2. Emphasizing systems change/institutional change approaches.

3. Recognizing the interplay between systemic/institutional and individual forces as they impact on client difficulties.

4. Exercising great caution and sensitivity before suggesting intervention focused on emotionally charged issues to people for who such intervention is likely more painful than the problem triggering the intervention.

5. Modifying the customary hierarchical distinctions between worker and client when working with people who can not consider emotional matters with a stranger; in contrast some people are comfortable only when a level of formality and hierarchy is maintained which well exceeds that customarily involved in social work.

6. Respecting culturally based perspectives on the types of persons who may or may not participate in important family
decisions (eg the men in the family; only members of the family network).

7. Recognizing the importance of incorporating ethnic/class/minority issues at all levels of practice, as well as in inter-staff/interprofessional relationships.

8. Being sure to arrange for the availability of workers who speak the clients' language when the client does not have command of English or needs help with cultural nuances available to him or her only in his language.

9. Paying attention to the relative merits of having workers who are of the same group as the client where this is appropriate.8

10. Assuring that our schools and social agencies facilitate the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes consonant with the broad definitions of what we have termed ethnic sensitive practice.

Lum (1992) calls attention to the distinction between emic and etic goals. Emic goals focus on the specific group under study while etic goals derive from the assumption that all human beings are alike in some important respects. In his view social workers need to be aware of both. Green (1982) has stressed the importance of working with culturally based criteria of problem definition, recognizing group specific linguistic categories and incorporating lay strategies into problem resolution. Our earlier review of suggested modification of interventive strategies suggested that most analysts consider existing models of practice to be viable, that is ethnic sensitive micro and macro approaches can, be built into the existing approaches to practice.

Conclusions

This review of the state of the art of ethnic sensitive social work practice leads us to a series of impressions, conclusions and recommendations.

Those analysts, who like ourselves have been involved in thinking about related issues for some time, have reason to be pleased. There is no doubt that the profession of social work
has sat up and taken notice of minority issues. Nevertheless, any number of people are dissatisfied with the extent or foci of attention. That dissatisfaction is not to be taken lightly. For some groups, the limited amount of overall attention translated into less than a handful of articles devoted to their people in a ten year period. The *Journal of Multicultural Social Work* is beginning to fill some of the gap. But inevitably, such a journal’s audience is likely to be more limited than that of the standard, wide circulation journals. We call upon these journals to take our findings as well as the work of Lum, (1992) McMahon and Allen-Meares (1992) and others very seriously, and to find ways of responding more forcefully to this compelling issue. The same call is addressed to the authors and editors of social work practice texts. Too many have treated the subject not at all, or sparingly. Not only are special chapters required, but integration of related content into all elements of the text is essential.

The fact that the profession’s response to its earlier neglect of minority issues has led to virtually total neglect of the cultural and ethnic issues and behaviors of other groups is, in our view, a grievous error. It is almost as if to atone for past sins, we have wiped significant segments of our population off our professional map—despite the fact that “whites” continue to constitute anywhere between 75 and 50% of the population in different regions of the country. We have robbed many people of their identity as any number of “hyphenated Americans” and make it difficult for social work students to learn about the needs and dispositions of people whom they encounter daily. Appreciation for diversity, and for the impact of ethnic group membership on the disposition to daily living calls for understanding of the ethnic reality of all people. In our view the present state of affairs furthers inequality and hierarchy—majority students *must* learn about minority persons, while the reverse is not true—and this does little to discourage a “we them” stance. Further, it limits our students’ and practitioners’ opportunity to learn about the range of people in the exciting, multicultural communities they serve; New York City’s former Mayor David Dinkins used the term “the gorgeous mosaic” to refer to the diversity characteristic of this country. It is time to rethink whether the virtually exclusive focus on minority
persons with minimal reference to others—that has characterized this segment of our literature for the past ten years furthers or retards goals of equality. In our view, both an ethnocultural and a minority perspective are essential.

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Ethnic Sensitive Practice


Ethnic Sensitive Practice


Notes

1. A more elaborate definition of culture is included in the article by Doman Lum found in this issue of the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*.

2. See a discussion of Longres' critique later in this paper.

3. See further discussion of this issue in the section focused on review of the literature.

4. In identifying topics and references no claim of complete coverage is made; we regret if pertinent materials have been omitted.

5. For a detailed discussion of these matters see the article by Ken Huang in this special issue of the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*.

6. See especially the article by Doman Lum in this issue.

7. See Devore and Schlesinger's discussion (1981, 1987, 1991) of "the route to the social worker" which suggests that many ethnic minority persons have contact with social workers in mandated and coercive contexts.