



Educator Q&A

What are the implications of new approaches to practice with multicultural communities for the way we teach cultural competence?

Drs. Yolanda Padilla, Ruth McRoy, and Rocio Calvo, the editors of this special issue of the *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, offer their ideas on how to bring new perspectives on practice with multicultural communities to social work education.

Dr. Yolanda Padilla

We need to offer “relief from the disaster-struck focus of most stories” ([Drawn & Quarterly](#)) about multicultural communities. This is what the beautiful portrayal of life in the West African Ivory Coast by Marguerite Aboutet in the [AYA Series](#) achieves. According to Aboutet, “that’s what I wanted to show in *Aya*: an Africa without the ... war and famine, an Africa that endures despite everything because, as we say back home, life goes on.” The series redirects the gaze to a “story of an Africa we rarely see—spirited, hopeful, and resilient,” a story of “a golden time” that “seems fueled by something wondrous.” All cultural groups have this side, but we rarely show it. What kinds of images would portrayals of multicultural communities like this conjure in the minds of students? How might they see them differently?

New research on social work practice with multicultural communities suggests that we need to reevaluate how we teach cultural competence. We often minoritize cultural communities by defining them by the marginalization they are facing and by making the treatment they receive from others part of their social identity. We other them as different, when what we are actually talking about is not their identity but social disparities and racial relations. Indeed, according to an analysis of articles on Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans published in the 1980s in four major social work journals, “most of the literature on social work practice with minorities is naive and superficial and fails to address their social context” (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992). The conclusion was reiterated in an article by Corley and Young (2018) based on a replication study of contemporary articles. Both articles were published in *Social Work*. There is no question that we need to address the social injustices that some communities face (and communities include that in their own stories), but we need to avoid what often happens, which is that we let it fully eclipse the cultural richness of these communities—the totality of their life experience, their beliefs, social norms, and institutions.

An emerging discourse in social work and other disciplines shows that the stories of multicultural communities are narratives of unprecedented resourcefulness and reinvention. For example, stories of resilience such as these are narrated by David Treuer, who grew up Ojibwe on a reservation in Minnesota, in his new book [The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee](#) (2019). As one review describes it, “Treuer evokes, with simmering rage, the annihilation of Indian lives and worlds, but he also unearths a secret history of Indians flourishing in art, government, literature, science and technology” ([The Minneapolis Star Tribune](#)).

The studies described in this Educator|Resource demonstrate that we need to do a better job of communicating the cultural richness inherent in the communities we serve by drawing on their own perspectives and putting literature written by authors from these communities at the center of our teaching. The fields of education and the social sciences provide powerful counternarratives, as do a growing number of critiques in social work. Examples of literature from which we can draw these new perspectives includes the following titles:



Social Work

- Corley, N. A., & Young, S. M. (2018). Is social work *still* racist? A content analysis of recent literature. *Social Work, 63*, 317–326.
- Crampton, A. (2015). Decolonizing social work “best practices” through a philosophy of impermanence. *Journal of Indigenous Social Development, 4*(1), 1–11.
- McMahon, A., & Allen-Meares, P. (1992). Is social work racist? A content analysis of recent literature. *Social Work, 37*, 533–539.
- Nadan, Y., & Ben-Ari, A. (2013). What can we learn from rethinking “multiculturalism” in social work education? *Social Work Education, 32*, 1089–1102.
- Williams, J., Simon, C., & Bell, A. (2015). Missing the mark: The image of the social work profession in an African-American community. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 24*(1), 56–70.

Education and the Social Sciences

- Emdin, C. (2016). *For White folks who teach in the hood... and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Kutukdjian, G., Corbett, J., & Rivière, F. (2009). *World culture report 2009: Investing in cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue*. Paris, France: UNESCO.
- Murray, A. (1969). The omni Americans. *The Urban Review, 3*(6), 38–45.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. (2018). *Care work: Dreaming disability justice*. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Treuer, D. (2019). *The heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the present*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

Dr. Ruth McRoy

It is important to teach students about the significance of demonstrating high levels of respect as well as culturally competent service delivery to diverse client populations. We must prepare our students to appreciate and better understand how the client’s racial and cultural background, as well as historical and contemporary experiences, can influence help-seeking behaviors and service use.

Moreover, we must develop classroom teaching strategies and assignments that require students to connect with, learn from, and feel comfortable in ethnically diverse communities. Students must be encouraged and challenged to find ways to overcome racial stereotypes and barriers to service delivery and promote the development and use of new evidence-based practice approaches designed to improve outcomes for specific racial and ethnic groups.

As we train students for practice with diverse populations, it is essential to use teaching strategies designed to help them

1. gain knowledge about historical and contemporary experiences of racial and ethnic groups;
2. acknowledge similarities as well as differences in the experiences of racially and ethnically diverse clients and communities;
3. understand the importance of building culturally sensitive relationships with diverse communities;
4. develop strategies for overcoming stereotypic perceptions and attitudes and for demonstrating respect for human diversity; and



5. learn about and implement existing evidence-based approaches for culturally competent practice with ethnically diverse clients and communities.

Dr. Rocio Calvo

As founding director of the [Latinx Leadership Initiative](#) at Boston College, I believe that we prepare future practitioners to work on sustainable solutions for complex problems. We also teach them that this work must be done in partnership with the communities affected by these problems. Evidence-based examples of this type of work, such as the ones comprised in this special issue, are ideal tools to teach future social workers how to effectively engage with the community.

I often think about how to teach these innovative approaches in social work practice. I make an intentional effort to include more evidence-based studies with multicultural communities in my syllabi. Relatedly, I establish clear criteria concerning what types of studies I would like to include. For instance, I consider what population I would like my students to learn more about and why, what type of research design I would like to showcase in a particular session, how the impact of the intervention was measured, and some limitations of the study that I'd like my students to learn from.

This intentional selection of studies facilitates designing interactive learning activities that help students understand the steps of the intervention as well as the critical skills that were helpful when working with a particular community on a specific issue. Examples of interactive learning activities that I use to teach evidence-based interventions are oral presentations, case studies, problem-solving vignettes, role play, and movie-forum.



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