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Cultural Competence and Social Work Education: Moving Toward Assessment of Practice Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Social work educators are responsible for ensuring that future practitioners are culturally competent and have the ability to work effectively with people from different backgrounds. The purpose of this article is to address the current limitations in measuring cultural competence and to report the results of a qualitative study examining stakeholders' conceptualizations of the definition, educational process, and evaluation of cultural competence in social work education. Findings support longstanding assumptions in the literature regarding the need for social workers to develop certain knowledge and attitudes as prerequisites of becoming culturally competent, and emphasize the need for further exploration of the way social workers define cultural competence, translate it into discrete practice behaviors, and assess how students demonstrate these behaviors.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Social justice is a core component of the mission of the social work profession (National Association of Social Work [NASW], 2001). Social workers believe that discrimination and prejudice directed against any group damage the social, emotional, and economic well-being of society as a whole. Emerging demographic realities in the United States necessitate the development of effective social work practice to promote the overall well-being of an increasingly diverse society at the micro-, mezzo-, and macrolevels. To achieve the goal of social justice in a multicultural society, social work educators have largely sought to teach students to be culturally competent, a celebrated, albeit largely undefined concept that has been strongly endorsed and even codified by the NASW (2001). This goal is based on the underlying assumption that the acquisition of cultural competence will help social workers achieve more socially just outcomes. Although this assumption has never been tested, social work educators have the responsibility of ensuring that future practitioners become culturally competent or acquire the ability to “engage diversity and difference in practice” (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2014).

Although attention to diversity has been a part of the CSWE *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) for almost 40 years, the standards have shifted from an emphasis on knowledge about specific groups to a focus on attitudes and behaviors that reflect appreciation of, respect for, and the ability to practice competently with difference (CSWE, 2014; Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, & Sowbel, 2011). This shift reflects the movement of social work educators from an outlook of colorblindness (in the late 1960s) to one of ethnic sensitive practice (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999) and multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s to the current emphasis on cultural competence (Lum, 2007). This concept, however, is ambiguously defined in the literature and, therefore, challenging to measure and teach. The purpose of this article is to report the results of a qualitative study of social work stakeholders' conceptualizations of cultural competence in social work education and to address the current limitations that exist in measuring its attainment.

Diversity standards in social work education

In the latest version of CSWE's (2015) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS), Competency 2—Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice, identifies culturally appropriate engagement as the core of effective practice with diverse populations rather than the mere acquisition of abstract cultural competence. Current educational policy, therefore, goes beyond requiring students to understand and be aware of the role of multiple identities, subjectivity, and social context in shaping human behavior, and the complex relationships that exist between people and their environments. It now also requires them to develop the ability to practice effectively with diverse populations (CSWE, 2015; Jani et al., 2011).

The new EPAS (CSWE, 2015) revises and expands the previous definition of cultural competence. Earlier iterations of the EPAS reflected an assumption that cultural competence could be operationalized through knowledge and attitude acquisition alone, defined as learning about the shared history and characteristics of various groups (Bonder, Martin, & Miracle, 2002). Thus, the standards contained the assumption that all that was required to practice competently with diverse populations was to acquire greater knowledge about these populations and heightened awareness of one's own worldview.

By contrast, the newly revised EPAS (2015) emphasizes the measurement of practice behaviors as indicators of professional competencies. There is general consensus that the ability of social work students to be culturally competent or practice competently with diverse client groups is a process that includes three components: development of an awareness of one's own cultural values, biases, power, and position, and how these factors affect a social worker's relationships with clients; understanding the client's worldview (including the ability to elicit the client's cultural beliefs); and development of culturally appropriate interventions (Green, 1999; Lum, 1999, 2007; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Sue & Sue, 2012). Yet, there is no agreement in the literature regarding what constitutes a culturally appropriate intervention, what the practice behaviors of a culturally competent person are, or even the underlying purposes of achieving cultural competence.

Because of the competency-based outcome approach the 2015 EPAS is based on, social work educators need to operationalize and measure students' ability to engage diversity and difference as an educational outcome. Critics of the behaviorally based competence approach, however, assert that it is a narrow and conceptually flawed approach to education that focuses on measurable outcomes rather than how they develop, and it pays insufficient attention to defining the benchmarks of specific competencies, how to attain them, or to how they should be evaluated (Carraccio, Englander, Ferentz, Martin, & Wolfsthal, 2002; Engelbrecht, 2007)). Thus, one of the primary challenges associated with assessing the teaching of diversity competence in social work education is the lack of suitable measures of competence in this area (Boyle & Springer, 2001; Kumaş-Tan, Beagan, Loppie, MacLoed, & Frank, 2007; Schim, Doorenbos, Miller, & Benkert, 2003).

Measures of diversity competence

Several scales are commonly used to measure competence with diversity, including the Cross-Cultural Competency Inventory (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Hernandez, 1991), the Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge-Skills Inventory (D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991), the Multicultural Counseling Awareness Scale (Ponterotto, Sanchez, & Magids, 1991), the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (Sowdowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994), the Quick Discrimination Index (Ponterotto, Bukard, Reiger, Greiger, & Dubuisson, 1995), the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale (Fuertes, Miville, Mohr, Sedlacek, & Gretchen, 2000), and the Ethnic-Competence-Skill Model in Psychological Interventions With Minority Ethnic Children and Youth (Ho, 1992). Although the latter four have been recommended for use in social work (Krentzman & Townsend, 2008), there is not yet sufficient validation of these instruments to justify their application to the assessment of clinical outcomes or educational goals (Boyle & Springer, 2001). Although most of the measures

demonstrate acceptable reliability, there is limited or unsatisfactory evidence regarding their validity, especially their construct validity (Kumaş-Tan, et al., 2007).

As reflected in the 2008 EPAS, the field of social work began moving away from defining difference solely in terms of race and ethnicity toward an understanding of the impact of multiple identities, such as sexuality, gender, age, and socioeconomic status, on human behavior. Existing measures, therefore, may not adequately capture a student's ability to work with diverse populations. In addition, no research links scores on existing measures to actual practice behaviors (Boyle & Springer, 2001). Finally, none of the previously mentioned instruments is specific to social work or addresses the need for assessment tools that can be used for internal program evaluation and external accreditation (Bogo, Regehr, Hughes, Power, & Globerman, 2002, 2004).

In an effort to create a measure specific to social work, Holden, Anastas, and Meenaghan (2003,/ 2005) and Holden, Anastas, Meenaghan, and Metrey (2002) have constructed an argument for using self-efficacy as a core outcome of social work education, based on Bandura's social cognitive theory. Holden et al. (2002) created the Social Work Self-Efficacy Scale (SWSE) designed to assess "social workers' confidence regarding a broad range of social work tasks" (p. 117). However, the SWSE does not specifically address diversity, and the measurement of efficacy does not necessarily indicate one's ability to engage with difference. This concern is also reflected in current measures of awareness or knowledge that do not necessarily reflect a person's ability to practice. Further, confidence has been found to have an inverse relationship with the ability to work with difference (Alpers & Zoucha, 1996; Nokes, Nickitas, Keida, & Neville, 2005).

In addition to the assumptions that higher self-confidence in one's ability equates to higher ability in practice, and that difference is largely about race and ethnicity, existing measures reflect other underlying assumptions about the measurement of cultural competence. These assumptions include the notion that quantifiable knowledge and attitudes are sufficient to achieve skill competence; a higher quantity of experiences, familiarity, communication, or engagement with a group leads to a higher skill level to work with difference; the practitioner is from the dominant group; and, therefore, the acquisition of cultural competence is largely a matter of obtaining knowledge about the ethnic other (Kumaş-Tan, et al., 2007).

In sum, as administrators of schools of social work strive to comply with the 2015 EPAS, they need to develop accurate measures of students' competence to engage effectively with difference and diversity. The primary purpose of the research reported in this article was to begin to address this gap. The article describes the first stages of the development of a measure of social work students' ability to engage with diversity and difference in practice. Recognized as experts in scale and measure development, Benson and Clark (1982) and DeVellis (2003) outline the specific steps that need to be followed. Two primary steps in the scale development and evaluation process are theoretical development of the measure and development of content. Interviewing and collecting information from key stakeholders are core methods for carrying out these steps in the scale development process.

Based on this approach, this article describes a qualitative study that gathered information from key stakeholders, including MSW and BSW social work faculty, students, and field instructors to expand our conceptualization and understanding of cultural competence as an essential outcome of social work education. Through the collection and analysis of this information, the authors hope to be able to engage in the next step of scale development and create a pilot measure of students' ability to work with diversity and difference.

Use of the term *cultural competence* in research

The development of valid scales requires clarity about the concepts that researchers are attempting to measure. In its use of the concept of intersectionality, the 2015 EPAS recognizes that culture is but one aspect of difference. This change may reflect several recent critiques of

the use of the term cultural competence in social work scholarship (Abrams & Moio; 2009; Ortiz & Jani, 2010).

These critiques emphasize the following points: First, culture is fluid and ever changing and, therefore, competence in a culture can never be permanently attained. Second, the acquisition of a sufficient level of competence required to engage effectively with diversity and difference involves more than merely understanding and valuing other cultures; yet this is often how cultural competence is interpreted. Even this limited outcome objective can only be realized through the processes of dialogue and explanation and ongoing efforts to understand alternative worldviews.

A third shortcoming of the concept of cultural competence has been the underlying assumption that culture is a uniformly positive phenomenon. This interpretation has precluded discussions of the negative impact of cultures on other populations under the umbrella of difference or diversity, for example, the sexism or homophobia some cultures exhibit. Osteen, Vanidestine, & Sharpe (2013) found that even when individuals endorsed ideals of social justice and equality, this did not automatically translate to positive regard across the range of culturally identified groups, but instead positive attitudes and beliefs were contextualized in identity-specific groups. Finally, any discussion of diversity requires an understanding of its social function and its relationship to social stratification, power, and oppression (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). This understanding is critical to any discussion that relates the issue of diversity to the goal of social justice as social work does.

Despite these numerous critiques, the concept of cultural competence reflected a significant advance in social work education's conceptualization of practice in an increasingly diverse environment and has been well received in many human service professions. Because of its widespread popularity, the term cultural competence is now used as an umbrella term for practice with difference. Although recent efforts encourage a shift from cultural competence toward cultural humility or cultural responsiveness (Nicotera & Kang, 2009), the underlying assumptions remain virtually the same, reflecting a rhetorical shift rather than a substantial distinction. Because of the familiarity with the term cultural competence and its widespread currency among social work faculty and students, we used it to describe the concept when we began to conduct our research.

The research described in this article aims to answer the following questions from the perspective of each key stakeholder group: What are the components of cultural competence? How can those components be demonstrated? How should cultural competence be taught? How should cultural competence be measured? and What demonstrable outcomes should be used to evaluate cultural competence?

Methods

We conducted a qualitative study that used some grounded theory methods to guide the thematic analysis of the data (Creswell, 2007). We conducted 10 targeted focus groups at two large mid-Atlantic universities: one group with BSW faculty, three with MSW faculty, two with MSW students, two with BSW students, and two with field instructors who teach MSW and BSW students. The universities primarily serve urban and suburban communities in a major metropolitan area with a high proportion of low-income and racial and ethnic minority populations. Most students complete their internships in agencies that serve these populations. The full-time faculty members in the BSW program are 75% female and 62.5% people of color. The BSW program has more than 400 students, 50% of whom identify as people of color, and about 85% are female. The MSW program enrolls more than 900 students per year. MSW students are nearly 90% female and roughly 40% identify as people of color. The full-time faculty in the MSW program is about 60% female and 15% people of color. Because of high participant interest among the MSW faculty, more focus groups were conducted with that group. Conversely, only one group was conducted with the BSW faculty because of the small size of the program, and only six field instructors were included in the study because of a low response rate from this cohort. A total of 64 people participated in the focus groups. Participant demographics are shown in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Demographics.

Gender	Students		Faculty		Field Instructors
	BSW	MSW	BSW	MSW	
Male	3 (15%)	2 (14%)	2 (20%)	6 (43%)	0 (0%)
Female	17 (85%)	12 (86%)	8 (80%)	8 (57%)	6 (100%)
	Race/ethnicity				
African	2 (10%)	6 (43%)	2 (20%)	2 (14%)	0 (0%)
American/Black	14 (70%)	5 (36%)	6 (60%)	10 (72%)	6 (100%)
Caucasian/White	2 (10%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Hispanic	1 (5%)	2 (14%)	1 (10%)	2 (14%)	0 (0%)
Asian/Indian	1 (5%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Biracial					
	Sexual orientation				
Lesbian/gay/homosexual	1 (5%)	8 (57%)	2 (20%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)
Bisexual	3 (15%)	4 (29%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Straight/heterosexual	16 (80%)	2 (7%)	8 (80%)	13 (93%)	6 (100%)
Age	<i>M</i> =25 (<i>SD</i> =6.8)	<i>M</i> =30 (<i>SD</i> =6.4)	<i>M</i> =51 (<i>SD</i> =8.6)	<i>M</i> =49 (<i>SD</i> =12.7)	<i>M</i> =48 (<i>SD</i> =7.2)
Total	20	14	10	14	6

Recruitment involved sending e-mails to departmental distribution lists, posting notices in departments, and purposive selection of participants. The invitation to participate consisted of a brief description of the study, its purpose and procedures, and the researchers' contact information. The invitation was also published in the school's daily bulletin, an online source of information provided daily on the School of Social Work's homepage to all faculty, staff, and students in the school. Finally, an advertisement was posted in the MSW and BSW social work departments. Faculty, students, and field instructors who expressed an interest in participating were sent an information letter and an electronic copy of the informed consent form for review. They were also given information on the days and times of the focus groups and were asked to commit to one of the available groups. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants before each focus group began. This project was approved by the institutional review boards at both universities.

Focus groups were conducted in classrooms on the campuses of the MSW and BSW programs during spring and fall 2012; each lasted about 60–90 minutes. To protect confidentiality, the researcher team assigned each participant a name selected at random to use on his or her name card. All tapes, notes, and subsequent transcriptions, presentations, and publications use the assigned random name to identify the participant. All participants were encouraged to maintain the privacy of other participants and the content of the group's discussion. After consenting to the research, participants were asked questions that followed a semistructured interview format, in which specific topics were covered while also allowing participant-identified topics to be discussed.

Three basic domains were included in the semistructured interview guide: definition of cultural competence (sample questions: what is cultural competence? What are the components of cultural competence? Do you consider yourself culturally competent?); teaching and learning cultural competence (sample questions: how should cultural competence be taught? What should be taught? How did you learn about cultural competence?); and evaluation of cultural competence (sample questions: how can those identified components of cultural competence be demonstrated? How should cultural competence be measured? What demonstrable outcomes should be used to evaluate cultural competence? What practice behaviors demonstrate your cultural competence? Are you culturally competent? If so, how do you know?). The themes that emerged from the data reflect answers to questions from all three domains.

Focus group discussions were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using components from Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory method. No software program was used to analyze the data. Data were independently coded through an open coding process by the three members of the research team. As part of this process, phrases and ideas from the data were

conceptualized through a labeling process, and memos and diagrams were sorted and used to give meaning to the identified concepts and their interrelatedness. This open coding process led each researcher to arrive at substantive codes. After these core concepts were identified by each researcher independently, they were discussed, compared, and synthesized by the research team during team meetings. Although the researchers shared a common framework about the conceptualization of cultural competence and its role in education and practice, the process of cross-validation provided opportunities for identifying and challenging potential bias. As part of the selective coding process, memos and diagrams were then sorted to identify cross-relationships and to further integrate and refine categories. Central themes were derived from this process. This process took place over a 9-month period during four different meetings. The process produced three major themes, with three subthemes for each, which are detailed in the next section.

Results

Themes emerged across all stakeholder groups in each of the three basic domain areas. In the first area, definition of cultural competence, three themes surfaced: Cultural competence itself is a flawed concept, self-awareness and understanding a client's identity are essential prerequisites of working with difference, and there are important traits involved in working with difference. In the second domain, teaching and learning cultural competence, three themes were also identified: Learning to work with difference is a process, not a tangible outcome; variations exist in how teaching and learning about difference occurs; and course management is essential to teach this material effectively. Finally, in the third domain, evaluation of cultural competence, three themes were also present: Educational outcomes and practice behaviors were not always synonymous or congruent, good social work practice is culturally competent practice, and alternative measurement approaches are needed to assess students' and practitioners' cultural competence. The themes and their inter-relatedness are further detailed in this section and in the discussion section that follows.

Domain 1: Definition of cultural competence

Theme 1: Cultural competence itself is a flawed concept

One theme that emerged from the focus groups was the limitations of the concept of cultural competence itself. Participants reported that the term lacks meaning because it is defined and practiced in so many diverse ways by different people. There was agreement that the term implies a static, unobtainable end point at which a practitioner has developed all the requisite knowledge and skills for working with individuals from all other cultures. In this regard, participants asserted that the concept does not take into account the dynamic, interpersonal processes that occur when working with difference. They also stated that working with difference is a bidirectional process, not a unidirectional one that assumes the worker has all the expertise. In addition, several participants commented that practitioners and clients are cultural beings who are connected to larger identity-based systems of culture while simultaneously existing as individual cultural beings. Thus, there was a common belief among the focus group participants that social work practice involves the interaction of people from different cultures rather than a process in which clients are acted on, as the term cultural competence suggests.

Faculty and students largely agreed that the current interpretation and conceptualization of cultural competence as a skill to be used to connect to clients of different ethnicities diverts attention from issues of power and oppression. One student said, "I feel like the term cultural competency has sort of diluted the race conversation." On a similar note, a faculty member said, "I think it's important for students leaving this program to understand that there are larger forces at work, that global and national and societal forces really shape who has what and why and under what circumstances."

Despite dissatisfaction with the way the concept of cultural competence is framed, and the often unstated assumptions and implications of the terminology as previously described, participants believed the ability to work with difference was important and named knowledge prerequisites and several behavioral traits that could enable a person to do so effectively. These are included in the following two themes under the domain of defining cultural competence.

Theme 2: Self awareness and understanding a client's identity are essential prerequisites of working with difference

The preceding comments from faculty and students also reflect the participants' belief that self-awareness, understanding clients' identities and group history, and recognizing how power and oppression are operationalized are essential, although insufficient components of working with difference. They asserted that social workers must be aware of their own biases, stereotypes, assumptions, preconceptions, and limitations to fully engage in cross-cultural practice. One student stated, "I find it very difficult to keep my stereotypes to myself. I mean I don't necessarily act on it [*sic*] but . . . it's very rare that I can come into work with just a blank slate."

Similarly, field instructors and faculty described self-awareness or the ability to identify one's biases as an indispensable precondition for effective cross-cultural work at any practice level. Several faculty members and field instructors commented on the importance of not generalizing about groups and of recognizing that the diversity within groups was as important as the diversity among groups.

Participants focused not only on knowledge about clients on the individual level but also on the need for social workers to study and explore culture at the societal level. Knowledge regarding the workings of oppression, discrimination, power, and privilege were recognized as critical, although they are often not given sufficient recognition as components of working with difference. A faculty member said, "Sometimes talking about culture and cultural competence is an easy way out of discussing issues like institutional racism or sexism or homophobia, and how, from a societal perspective, they pervade everything."

Participants agreed that although self-awareness and knowledge are fundamental components for preparing to practice with difference, they are not actual practice behaviors. A student commented, "I understand the concept [of cultural competence], but what does it tell me to *do*?" Citing the lack of consistent definition of cultural competence, a field instructor reported that "it's not like empathy where you know what it looks like." Participants did, however, identify some traits that they would consider important when working with difference.

Theme 3: Important traits involved in working with difference

Students, field instructors, and faculty reported some traits that would enable a social worker to engage with difference effectively, including "openness," "humility," "flexibility," "responsiveness," "curiosity," "fluidity," "awareness," "willingness," "understanding," "having a basic comfort level," and "expecting the unexpected." Similar to the concept of cultural competence, these terms are loosely defined and possess a positive connotation. In addition, they describe a person's characteristics rather than specific behaviors. In contrast, some faculty members were able to describe behaviors including the "ability to build a relationship with people who have different backgrounds from you," and the "ability to unravel and assemble to make critical analysis." When asked what cultural competence looks like in practice, a field instructor said, "It's more of a practice approach, or mindset, that of being open, than a skill."

Domain 2: Teaching and learning cultural competence

Theme 1: Learning to work with difference is a process, not a tangible outcome

Field instructors, faculty, and students agreed that learning to work with diversity and difference is a cumulative process that takes place over time, often throughout a career of social work practice.

As one field instructor pointed out, “It is a lifelong commitment. You are never going to take an exam, pass, and move on.” Faculty reported witnessing progress over the course of students’ time in the program reflected in the quality of their papers and the level of discourse in the classroom. Similarly, a student getting ready to graduate said,

I just finished my fifth or sixth self-reflection paper I’ve done since I’ve been here . . . it is really enlightening because I went back and read the first paper I wrote and then the last one, and it really helped me appreciate the changes I have made [during my social work education].

Faculty members and field instructors acknowledged that because social work students come from diverse backgrounds with varying employment and personal experiences, they enter the educational environment with vastly different levels of cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. A faculty member stated, “Some students come in as an eight, some students come as a five, some students come in as a three . . . It’s just so fluid.” Thus, identifying ways to assess students’ progress in their ability to work with diversity and difference rather than specific behaviors was considered important.

Because of the progressive nature of learning to work with difference and the wide diversity in students’ backgrounds, students, faculty, and field instructors spoke of the importance of experiential learning as an effective teaching tool. Several students, faculty, and field instructors discussed the experiential exercises they found useful in teaching and learning diversity content, such as journaling, participating in an activity such as the Star Power game, or using mapping tools such as the Culturagram.

Theme 2: Variations exist in how teaching and learning about difference occurs

Participants reported variation with regard to course structure, content, and goals in their classes. Faculty and students said that content on diversity and cultural competence is delivered using either a stand-alone or an infusion model, and each has its pros and cons. It was generally agreed that courses using a stand-alone model are often upper-level electives (e.g., Social Work with Black Families) and, therefore, permit student self-selection. The use of a stand-alone model may also shift the cultural focus onto the group of interest and not the social worker, promoting a norm versus other mentality, and may shift responsibility for covering this content from all faculty to only those faculty teaching diversity courses. Nevertheless, participants felt that a stand-alone foundation course that focuses on oppression, power, and privilege as they relate to race, religion, disabilities, and sexuality could provide a baseline for all students as they move forward and would ensure that such content is not taught as an afterthought.

The infusion model, in contrast, promotes shared, collective responsibility among the faculty for addressing culture throughout the curriculum but often leads to dilution of this content and allows little accountability. One student noted,

I noticed whether it was a clinical class or policy class, that cultural competence was left toward the end of the semester. It just became systematic. It was very noticeable. I thought initially that it was done in an attempt to get the class comfortable to talk about the subject but that never happened.

Faculty and students expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment with the lack of space for content on diversity provided by social work education. Although faculty reported frustration with time limitations inherent to an infusion model, student participants desired increased possibility for discussion of difficult and controversial topics and that faculty often “missed [the] opportunity to educate people.”

Students also felt it was an ethical duty of a social work professional to be able to hold such conversations.

[Social workers] have to be facilitators of this conversation, at dinner tables, at community meetings because that’s where these conversations are going to happen. It would have been great if we could have been trained to be able to hold that space for people.

Students perceived that faculty have the responsibility to create that space, as illustrated in the following theme.

Theme 3: Course management is essential to teach this material effectively

Faculty, students, and field instructors concurred that the environment created by instructors plays an important role in how effectively content on diversity and difference is delivered and received. Although students noted missed opportunities (as previously stated), faculty and field instructors expressed awareness of their responsibility and ability to create a safe atmosphere in which students can openly discuss their views on diversity and use these discussions to enhance students' understanding and knowledge.

A field instructor commented,

We have to be mindful as field instructors and as supervisors that we have to create a trusting environment meaning if that student or an intern comes to you and says I just really can't stand working with "those" people, you have to allow that place to be trusting enough so that they can say it so you can process it.

All participants considered the ability to have open and honest dialogue was a necessary component of learning to work effectively with difference. Modeling was important to students, and students perceived some faculty as lacking the interest or skills to address issues of culture in their classes. "We need faculty members that [*sic*] can facilitate those discussions regardless of what [they believe]. As another student noted, "My professor said 'this is how I run my class, these are the people I work with, and these are the [only] people we're gonna talk about.'"

Domain 3: Evaluation of cultural competence

Theme 1: Educational outcomes and practice behaviors were not always synonymous or congruent

Participants in the study distinguished the identification and measurement of educational outcome indicators from the measurement of actual practice behaviors or skills for working with difference. Faculty and students were generally in agreement about what constituted important educational outcomes: ability to identify one's own biases, acquisition of sufficient knowledge about different cultural groups, and development of critical thinking skills. A faculty member noted that an educational outcome of cultural competence was "Critical analysis, the ability to unravel and reassemble." Similarly, a field instructor described an outcome of cultural competence as "adopting a critical perspective, awareness and comfort . . . a questioning attitude."

However, almost all the participants struggled to identify valid methods for assessing students' actual skills or practice behaviors that would demonstrate competence in working or engaging with difference. Describing a student with self-awareness, knowledge, and critical thinking skills, a faculty member said, "They still can't walk out [into a practice situation] and know exactly what to do with that information." Several faculty and field instructors stated that cultural competence in practice was an indefinable quality. "I know it when I see it," a field instructor commented. Another participant agreed: "You can't quantify it, there is no recipe."

Members of each participant group noted that the lack of clarity in defining key terms such as competence and engaging with difference made it difficult to identify practice behaviors. A faculty member questioned, "What is the purpose of cultural competence? Why? What do we expect is the outcome of culturally competent students?" In addition, the lack of clear definition and purpose leads to difficulty teaching the content, as described by another faculty member, "If we don't know what we are teaching, then how can we say that [students] changed because of what we taught?"

Theme 2: Good social work practice is culturally competent practice

The idea that good practice is culturally competent practice ran through each participant group. Several participants reported that they knew culturally competent practice had taken place when agreed-on goals were met and they were thus able to "practice effectively across cultures." Referring

to how she conceptualizes the ability to work with difference, a faculty member said it is “when you are able to achieve what you want to achieve [with the client system].” Another faculty member recognized the underlying assumptions and risks involved in regarding the conceptualization of culture as a separate entity, apart from practice as a whole,

[Past studies demonstrate the most important qualities of a worker] are respect and things like that, but it was not cultural competence but the competence of the worker that clients wanted . . . but [cultural competence] has emphasized that it’s very, very difficult to work across cultural boundaries to the point that students don’t even think they should try. That’s very, very dangerous for the future of our society.

Theme 3: Alternative measurement approaches are needed to assess students’ and practitioners’ cultural competence

Although they had difficulty identifying discrete practice behaviors that would indicate the ability to work with difference or be culturally competent, participants did brainstorm alternative suggestions for how to measure student competence in this regard. Some participants suggested that measurement could take place in the field using process recordings; others proposed the possibility of using simulated cases or vignettes. In addition, faculty, field instructors, and students all promoted the idea of using client feedback to assess students’ abilities. A faculty member said, “What do the clients think? What do the communities think? What do the receivers of whatever we are doing? The feedback we get in many cases (may be) very different than what we thought we were doing.”

Participants also noted the importance of measuring the evolution of student thinking, knowledge, attitudes, and skills to recognize individual progress. They cited two reasons for this assertion. First, the acquisition of cultural competence is a process and second, because the student body was diverse. However, one faculty member perceived a problem with this approach. “There has to be that level that we say ‘if you don’t know this or you are not to this level, we can’t graduate you.’” Another remarked, “For me it comes back to the word competence. As a school we have to define some level at which students are supposed to be at to finish. . . . It goes back to, what are the metrics for this benchmark?”

A final difficulty with the measurement of the practice behaviors encompassed in the ability to engage with difference had to do with the gray area inherent in cross-cultural work. A faculty member compared it to teaching ethics using an ethical screening tool that measures students’ attainment of concrete skills. This faculty member’s comment also addresses one reason for students’ perception that they are not prepared to work with clients from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, she brings up an important measurement issue regarding the distinction between measuring educational outcomes, such as knowledge and attitudes, and practice behaviors or skills, that participants believed are acquired during a lifelong process of practice, which includes the assembly of its discrete components.

Discussion

This research contributes to the literature by enhancing our understanding of how cultural competence is defined, taught, learned, and could be evaluated. It also provides insight into some of the challenges to the competency-based learning approach, and the next steps that would need to be taken to develop a pilot measure of students’ competence to engage with diversity and difference.

Findings from this study support long-standing assumptions in the literature regarding the process of becoming culturally competent—that developing self-awareness and an awareness of the client’s worldview are prerequisites to providing effective interventions (Sue et al., 1992). Many existing scales of cultural competence solely measure these two important, but insufficient, steps to being culturally competent (Krentzman & Townsend, 2008). However, data from this study emphasize that the third component, the practice behaviors involved in implementing culturally appropriate interventions, needs further exploration.

The results of this study also underscore the complexities and subtleties involved in teaching cultural competence and in evaluating students' educational outcomes. Given the dual emphasis of current accreditation standards—to teach students to practice effectively with diversity and difference and to measure their attainment of competencies and practice behaviors—the way we define cultural competence, translate it into discrete practice behaviors, and assess whether students can demonstrate these behaviors is particularly important. The findings indicate that a more nuanced perspective on the meaning of the construct of cultural competence and its translation into practice is needed.

The ambiguity of current definitions of cultural competence and the lack of clarity about what constitutes measurable educational and practice outcomes have created substantial difficulties for faculty who are charged with achieving these challenging goals, as participants' comments reflected. They remarked that the separation of cultural competence from overall practice competence is artificial. In the real world, cultural competence is a prerequisite of practice competence; in turn, practice competence seamlessly incorporates the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that constitute cultural competence, an integrative process that takes place through experience over time, as the literature in social psychology and other disciplines has demonstrated (Prochaska, 2013; Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 2013). As the findings of this study suggest, this requires social workers to acquire critical thinking skills and the ability to initiate and sustain dialogue with people from diverse backgrounds. The distinction that is sometimes drawn or implied in the social work literature distorts the educational process by separating the acquisition of practice competencies from the attainment of cultural competence and other practice behaviors. Social work educators need to find a way to address these essential components of practice in a holistic manner.

This presents a particularly vexing challenge because of the conflict between competency-based education, which focuses primarily on the assessment of measurable practice outcomes and traditional professional training, which emphasizes holistic learning and development, including the value and attitudinal dimensions of practice (Talbot, 2004). Although a competency-based approach may provide specific guidance regarding performance expectations, as was seen in the data, it does not indicate how these goals should be achieved or why it is important to achieve them (Mulder, Gulikers, Biemans, & Wesselink, 2009). Clarification of the goals of a competency-based approach needs to occur to develop effective teaching strategies and methods of assessing students' attainment of these competencies.

In the study, the participants' inability to identify clearly culturally competent practice behaviors underscores this point and poses another often unasked question: What is the purpose of a social work practitioner becoming culturally competent? The original purpose of diversity education was to enhance students' understanding of concepts such as discrimination, oppression, power, and privilege to develop practice skills consistent with the profession's goal of social justice. Data from our study demonstrate that the current working understanding of cultural competence does not address those concepts nor do popular alternative terms such as culturally responsive and cultural humility. Participants' comments in our study reflect a desire to realign the educational process with previous goals; they also reveal that participants regard the underlying purpose of cultural competence today as the ability to practice social work effectively and achieve desired goals with people of all backgrounds. The 2015 EPAS refers to this as the ability to "engage diversity and difference in practice" (CSWE, 2015, p. 7), but it does not define engagement clearly. As a result, this competency cannot be easily taught or measured. In addition, engagement is assumed to be a desirable end in itself; yet, the current approach to assessing cultural competence omits a critical examination of practice goals, how they are determined, and by whom.

As in all research, there were several limitations to the study. Although the sample size is fairly large for a qualitative study and included field instructors from a variety of area social service organizations, it included only students and faculty from one school of social work who self-selected to participate in the study. In addition, the field instructors who participated did not include any men or people of color. Several explanations for this self-selection are possible. Faculty members

who have long expressed an interest in the topic of cultural competence and diversity were well represented among the participants. Students who shared a concern about the effectiveness of the curriculum in addressing these issues were also more likely to participate. The study's qualitative design did not allow the researchers to determine any causal relationship between teaching methods and educational outcomes. However, the results are informative for the content and construct development of a measure of student outcomes.

Additionally, the initiation of a strategic planning process in the school and the creation of an ad hoc faculty-student committee to address matters of diversity in the school and its educational programs also served as an impetus for participation. Thus, the findings are not generalizable, although they may have relevance to a larger population. It would be interesting to speculate, for example, on the responses that would be provided by faculty and students in programs with significantly different demographics, such as historically Black colleges and universities. Further research among such programs would be useful in determining the most effective ways to assess students' ability to engage with diversity and difference in practice.

It is also important to note that faculty members conducted the focus groups. It is possible that students did not express all their thoughts or concerns because they were speaking to faculty. To address this issue, students who were currently enrolled in any of the researchers' classes were precluded from the study, as were the researchers' academic advisees and field students. Finally, although focus groups are an effective method of data collection because they draw on group synergy, in an organization with a clear hierarchy, such as an academic setting, participants may feel inhibited to reveal their honest opinions (Padgett, 2008). Nevertheless, we believe the data in this study provide insight into the definition, education, and evaluation of cultural competence and can further the conceptualization of diversity in social work education.

Summary and conclusions

This study attempted to identify the underlying constructs that provide the foundation for the development of culturally competent practice through professional social work education. The findings take the first steps in the creation of a pilot measure that will assess students' ability to engage with diversity and difference. The data suggest that a measure of cultural competence might include assessment of knowledge, attitudes, and practice behaviors. As seen in the participants' comments, commonly used assessments of educational outcomes include academic or reflection papers, discussions in classes or field supervision, and the use of process recordings, role playing, and other experiential activities. In addition, a student proposed "assessing students' historical knowledge of system issues related to culture, race, and difference in this country." Knowledge and attitudes may be best measured using quantitative methods, and assessment of practice behaviors will likely require a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. It might also be useful to enhance the training of field instructors to assist them in evaluating their own cultural competence and students' acquisition of appropriate skills.

The next step in the current study is to develop the content of the assessment instrument through consultation with content experts and pilot testing the measure. Based on previous literature and findings from the current study, domain areas for such an instrument might include:

1. Knowledge of how the nature and impact of societal oppression differs among diverse groups; this would include awareness of the unequal distribution of power and privilege in society and in the client/ worker relationship, and the impact of cultural differences on the various stages of social work practice.
2. Awareness of how people's personal biases and life experiences influence their attitudes, underlying assumptions about the impact of culture on problem causation, and conceptions of the nature of need and of the helping process (Green, 1999).
3. Ability to engage in critical analysis, including the ability to integrate knowledge from different sources, awareness of the impact of cultural differences on the various stages of social work

practice, the ability to determine the cultural factors pertaining to clients' situations, and the ability to go beyond a surface interpretation of culturally-related phenomena to recognize their underlying meaning and implications for social work practice.

4. Ability to apply culturally relevant knowledge, awareness, and critical analysis in each phase of social work practice, including engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, and termination, combined with the recognition that these practice phases are components of a nonlinear process.

Following an assessment of pilot data and any necessary changes, the measure will be implemented with a large sample of BSW and MSW students for the purposes of psychometric evaluation. Future research in the field should explore in more depth how practitioners, faculty, and students demonstrate the practice behaviors that reflect cultural competence and how these behaviors develop at different career stages. It should also examine how clients perceive the expression of cultural competence in practice interventions in diverse settings.

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