

**The Social Worker  
Volume 64 (3) Fall 1996**

**Developing Racial and  
Cultural Equity  
in Social Work Practice**

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Abrégé

*Le présent document soutient que l'organisation de services sociaux tenant compte de la diversité culturelle doit s'appuyer sur la compréhension de la culture dominante et non sur celle des minorités culturelles. Les auteurs examinent la culture dominante canadienne et les caractéristiques ethnocentriques qui neutralisent les tentatives de développement d'une société équitable. Ils expliquent comment cet ethnocentrisme se manifeste parfois au sein des organismes de services sociaux et proposent diverses manières d'y échapper dans l'organisation de services sociaux vraiment équitables.*

**INTRODUCTION**

**T**his paper argues that the first step in developing culturally sensitive social work services does not lie in understanding minority cultures, but in understanding the dominant Canadian culture. The authors examine the dominant Canadian culture and identify ethnocentric characteristics which frustrate attempts to develop an equitable society. How this ethnocentrism is sometimes reflected in social work agencies is discussed. Some ways of avoiding ethnocentrism in developing truly equitable social work services are outlined.

**STRIVING FOR EQUITY**

Canada stands tall among the world's nations on issues such as human rights and multiculturalism. This does not mean that Canada's human rights record is unblemished, or that Canada has perfected multiculturalism. This country does, however, strive to ensure equity for all Canadians.

Canadian social work plays a part in striving for equity by trying to ensure that members of all ethnic, racial and cultural groups have equal opportunities to benefit from social work services. Agencies attempt to do this by examining minority cultures and adapting services to meet the needs of clients from these cultures (Laungani 1993; McGoldrick, Pearce, & Giordano, 1982; Thrasher & Anderson, 1988). Although this approach has merit, trying to understand minority cultures without first understanding the dominant culture is counterproductive. Indeed, understanding ethnic and minority cultures is shaped not only by the nature of these cultures, but by the culture of the observer (Herberg, 1993; Katz, 1978; Laird 1994; Latting, 1990; Laungani, 1992). As most social work agencies are based in the dominant culture, this is the framework within which agencies attempt to understand minority cultures. Agencies must, therefore, develop an understanding of the dominant Canadian culture before attempting to understand minority cultures.

### **UNDERSTANDING CANADIAN CULTURE**

Canadians have difficulty understanding and defining our culture. We often find it easier to say what our culture is not, rather than what it is. One of the things we define ourselves as not being is "American." Many, however, also say that Canadians do not wear turbans, speak Cantonese or Italian or attend temples, mosques or synagogues. Despite this claim, Canada is a multicultural society. Recognizing that contemporary Canada includes people from many races and cultures, many of whom helped build this nation, a formal policy of multiculturalism was adopted in 1971. Canadians, therefore, do speak Italian, Cantonese and many other languages besides French and English. We wear turbans, veils and yarmulkes as well as baseball caps. Canadians attend temples, mosques and synagogues as well as churches. Former Prime Minister Trudeau captured this when he said: "To say we have two official languages is not to say we have two official cultures, and no particular culture is more official than another. A policy of multiculturalism must be a policy for all Canadians" (cited in British Columbia Social Services, 1993, p. 29).

Despite a policy of multiculturalism, Canadian minorities and people of colour are still considered as separate from Canadian society or culture. Blacks first came to Canada in the sixteen hundreds and the Chinese in the nineteenth century, yet members of these and other visible minority groups are frequently asked where they come from. In contrast, white Canadians of European descent are seldom asked to explain how they got here, or why they are part of the nation (James, 1992).

Failure to recognize people from minority groups as "Canadian" has many consequences. For instance, Canadian culture fails to reflect the values and norms of its minority members. Although the Canadian push for personal achievement and advancement may not be as overt as it is in the United States, an emphasis on self-actualization, individual autonomy and personal achievement predominates. Canadian culture, its norms, laws and policies are shaped by white Anglo-French images and dominated by Western ideology. Minority cultures, many of which are non-individualistic and emphasize the familial and community context of the individual (Hall, 1981), are seldom felt in shaping the Canadian social fabric.

### **ETHNOCENTRIC MULTICULTURALISM**

A form of *ethnocentric multiculturalism* exists within Canada, where multiculturalism is practiced with an ethnocentric bias. White British and French cultures define the nation, while minority cultures are seen as an appendage to mainstream society. As an adjunct on the fringe of society, minorities are only accepted by the dominant culture through concession and tolerance. Wearing of turbans with police uniforms and allowing Muslim prayers at schools did not emerge from a recognition that Canada includes minority values and norms; these developments were "tolerated" because Canada "concedes" to minorities. Although tolerance by the dominant culture is noble, David See-Chai Lam, British

Columbia's former lieutenant governor says that tolerance, "...is like saying 'You smell, but I can hold my breath'" (cited in Dalglish, 1994). Being "tolerated" and relying on concession to participate and belong in society keeps minorities in a perpetual marginal position. Minorities are not seen as full members of society whose presence should shape and influence Canada's culture, practices and national identity.

### **THE EFFECTS OF ETHNOCENTRICITY**

Ethnocentrism has a devastating impact. In a small town just outside Toronto, John, a four-year-old child of colour, cried because he wished he was white. Something in Canada caused one of its young to believe he was inferior because of his colour. Something excluded John and made him feel that he did not belong.

John's negative self-image worsened when he began school. There were no teachers of colour at his school and he was hounded with racist remarks in the school yard. Although John was referred to a social worker for help with his self-esteem, he returned from school one day saying that he had learnt that white really was better than "brown," because he had seen a picture of God in a book, and God was white!

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If Canadian culture does not change, John will grow up to discover that he will be treated differently in hiring processes. He will only get one job offer for every three his white peers obtain. If he works hard enough to rise in a corporation, he will discover that 94% of corporate head hunters will not consider him because of his colour and 80% of head hunters will be asked to ensure that he and other people of colour are excluded from the hiring process (Ministry of Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, 1989). Despite Canada's multicultural policy, John will continue to find that he does not belong.

In an attempt to help John belong, his teacher suggested that he bring books to school with stories about *his* culture, so that other children might better understand him. John's teacher failed to recognize that John and his family identified with mainstream Canadian culture (even though mainstream culture had not fully accepted them). Even if John had identified with a minority culture, understanding this culture would not remedy the problem. Indeed, the problem was not with the minority culture. It was the dominant culture and its failure to accept John as a part of the fabric of Canadian society.

A similar response was received by Sikhs and Jews, whose religions require the wearing of

turbans or yarmulke. Sikhs and Jews were effectively barred from Canadian Legion halls by requiring the removal of head dress to enter the halls (Bill and Edwards, 1994). Understanding Sikh culture or Judaism could not solve this problem, because Legion administrators were aware that their requirements barred Sikhs and Jews. The problem was the way the dominant culture *conditionally* accepts minorities. In times of war the dominant culture readily accepted thousands of Sikhs and Jews into military service and adapted uniforms to meet religious requirements. Yet after the wars were won, mainstream Canadian veterans would not accept their Sikh and Jewish comrades in Legion Halls.

### **SOCIAL WORK RESPONSES**

It is futile for social work agencies to try to understand minority cultures without first understanding the dominant culture. Having seen that the dominant culture is exclusionary and only conditionally accepts minorities, additional problems can be seen in the strategy of examining minority cultures to develop culturally sensitive social work services. Focusing on minority cultures, while ignoring the dominant culture, bolsters the dominant culture as a norm or standard from which other cultures must be weighed and measured. This reinforces minority cultures as existing *outside* mainstream culture. Minority groups are confirmed as "them," while the majority are confirmed as "us," resulting in the ethnocentric nature of the dominant culture being reinforced or reproduced in agency practice.

This should not be surprising. Indeed, as mainstream social work agencies are an integral part of Canadian society, barriers to equity existing within that wider society can be expected to be mirrored within agencies. Having a better understanding of the dominant culture, however, allows agencies to reach out for effective routes to equity, to avoid the traps of ethnocentrism.

### **EQUITY THROUGH SOCIAL WORK**

The paths leading to the delivery of equitable social work services are similar to the paths the nation must follow to achieve racial and cultural equity. People from minority racial and cultural minority groups must be allowed to belong. For this to occur, Trudeau's vision of Canada has to be realized, where "no one culture is more official than another." Cultural and racial equity must replace ethnocentric multiculturalism.

Cultural and racial equity do not require those who identify with the dominant culture to give up their culture. Indeed, the freedom to maintain one's culture is the essence of this equity. Equity does, however, require recognition that minority cultures form a legitimate part of mainstream society. If such equity existed, comments such as "Canadians *like me* worship in churches, speak English or French and are white," would be acceptable. But comments such as, "*we* Canadians worship in churches, speak English or French and

are white," would be instantly recognized as inaccurate, because *we* Canadians are also a people of colour, we speak Cantonese, Italian, Punjabi and worship in mosques, temples and synagogues.

If social work agencies recognized the equal place of minority cultures, these would be seen as something that should be brought into the agency and incorporated into the agency's culture and norms. Many social work agencies are making progress in incorporating minority influences in their organizations by having minority representation at Board, staff and consumer levels. Although such measures are positive, unless they are accompanied by an understanding of ethnocentricity and a commitment to racial and cultural equity, the result will be no more than tokenism. Racial and cultural equity is not just a matter of representation and adjusting services to meet the needs of minorities.

Agencies moving beyond ethnocentrism will be reshaped by the entire community. Reshaping will focus on the agency reflecting objectives to which families and individuals

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from minority cultures and the dominant culture can relate, without a "them" and "us" mentality developing. An example of movement beyond ethnocentrism can be provided from foster care. Agencies will not only recruit foster parents from the many cultures and races within the community, they will also ensure *all* children in *all* foster homes have access to toys and books representing various races and cultures. This is just as important for white children in white homes as it is for children of colour. All foster homes having items portraying diverse races and cultures would ensure that *all* foster children would grow up learning that their environment included people from many cultures and races. Children would not be subjected to exclusively white images that reinforce the definition of society as white and Anglo-French. If John's school had

reflected multicultural images, he would have had his racial identity positively reinforced. The definition of society as a whole would begin to include, rather than exclude him. John and other children of colour would not be placed in the position of having to explain or justify their place in Canada, or seek vainly to belong in a society that sees them as outsiders.

Agencies reshaping their norms and values to include minority perspectives would not only ensure that services become sensitive to the needs of *all* members of society on a micro level, they would also play a part in reshaping Canada on a macro level. Indeed, social work agencies avoiding ethnocentrism and developing truly equitable services might influence and change wider Canadian culture. Perhaps Trudeau's vision might then be realized—a

multicultural Canada where every Canadian can retain a racial, cultural or religious identity while enjoying a true sense of belonging within Canadian society as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

Although understanding minority cultures is an important part of providing social work services in a multicultural society, this alone cannot lead to the development of equitable services. Social work agencies must do more than just try to understand and meet the needs of minority communities. Agencies must be shaped by minority communities. Only then, will a culture exist within which truly equitable social work services can be developed.

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1996

#### **Postscript 2002**

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