CULTURALLY COMPETENT SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MALAYSIA
Amalan Kerja Sosial Cekap-budaya Bagi Bertindak balas Terhadap Cabaran-cabaran Pandemik COVID-19 di Malaysia

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Abstract

In the poem *We are in the same storm, but not in the same boat*, the author Barr (2020) vividly describes how COVID-19 impacts people differently. Indeed, at this time of a global health crisis, questions arise as to whether culture makes a difference in the way people respond to it and react to the subsequent policy measures globally and locally. As social workers rise to the challenges posed by the pandemic in carrying out their various roles, is the issue of cultural competence still relevant? In this paper, the author explores culturally competent social work practice in responding to the varied needs of the people in the face of the pandemic. Based on three major approaches of cultural competence: cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and power analysis approach, the author discusses how each approach provides social workers with different lenses to view the experiences of people and in turn, play social work roles professionally. The paper concludes with the remarks of 'unity in diversity and how professional social workers may help forge solidarity among Malaysians and professional social workers worldwide.

Keywords*:* Cultural competence, cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, power analysis, diversity, solidarity

Introduction

COVID-19, with its first reported outbreak in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019 and later declared by the World Health Organisation as a pandemic in March 2020, has drastically changed people's lives worldwide. In the last two years, this global health crisis and the subsequent containment measures imposed by the government have had far-reaching social and economic ramifications on the lives of Malaysian from all strata of society and in all different regions. Many are confronted with a loss of livelihood and employment. Family relationships are profoundly affected - for some, violence and conflict have escalated due to stress and confined space in the home environment. In contrast, others have to endure long physical separation due to work across states or national borders. Social and psychological problems abound - stress, anxiety and depression, isolation and loneliness, burnout and fatigue - are shared experiences as families struggle with the social and economic consequences of the pandemic, the vulnerability of children, older persons, and persons with disabilities to neglect and abuse increases.

However, while the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting every person today, how people respond to it and react to the subsequent policy measures varies. As in the poem "*we are in the same storm, but not in the same boat*," the author Barr (2020) vividly describes how pandemics impact people differently. Indeed, in Malaysia, we can visualise that some in the community are in a super yacht while others are in *a sampan,* facing the danger of capsizing in the storm. The author poignantly expresses the gulf between people's experiences in the following:

> Some were in their "home office". Others looking through trash to survive. Some want to go back to work because they are running out of money. Some have experienced the near-death of the virus, some have already lost someone from it, and some believe they are infallible and will be blown away if or when this hits someone they know.

The questions that arise are: Are the way different people deal with the pandemic and the subsequent standard operation procedure anything to do with their cultures? Does culture make a difference in the way people respond to the pandemic? In the same way as how people react to a crisis, to health and illness issues? The answers to these interrelated questions will shed light on whether culture matters in social workers' response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. In other words, whether the issue of cultural competence is still relevant

as social workers rise to the challenges posed by the pandemic in carrying out their various roles.

In this paper, the author explores culturally competent social work practice in responding to the varied needs of the people in the face of the pandemic. Based on three major approaches to cultural competence - cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and power analysis - the author discusses how each approach provides social workers with different lenses to view people's experiences and, in turn, play social work roles professionally. The paper concludes with the remarks of "Ubuntu: I am because we are" - highlighting "we are all in it together" and how professional social workers may help forge solidarity among Malaysians and social workers worldwide.

Social Work, Culture and Cultural Competence

The idea of cultural competence has become increasingly important in the social work profession internationally and in other caring professions. A plethora of concepts and terms have emerged, including culturally appropriate practice, culturally sensitive practice, culturally responsive practice, multicultural social work, cultural awareness, cultural safety (Abraham & Martin, 2014), and cultural humility (Greene-Moton & Minker, 2019) with guidelines aiming at providing knowledge and skills for social workers working across cultures. The recognition of social workers' competency in working with people of diverse backgrounds is also reflected in the last revised definition of social work in the International Federation of Social Work in 2014 (https://www.ifsw.org/global-definition-of-social-work) as stated below:

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

Respect for diversity is adopted as one of the fundamental principles, and "indigenous knowledge" constitute the repertoire of knowledge underpinning social work practice.

Likewise, in the Malaysian Association of Social Workers (https://www.masw.org.my/blank-page-1), there is also a specific mention of the profession needing to be cognisant of cultural diversity:

> The profession also contributes towards social development and social change through the enhancement of social policies, legislation, programmes and services, appropriate to the needs of Malaysia diverse socio-cultural population for a better quality of life.

So, what then is cultural competence? There has been no one universally accepted definition. Most writings on cultural competence alluded to cultural competence as "*the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures*" and "*Include knowledge and interpersonal skills to understand, appreciate and work with individuals and families from cultures other than one's own*" (Harrison, 2014). However, the set of knowledge and skills for cultural competence to be operationalised and assessed remained an open and elusive field, particularly beyond Euro-American contexts. For cultural competence to be clearly understood and delineated to become practical guidelines for social workers, the concept of culture needs to be further understood.

What is culture?

The author believes that before people can have a good understanding of culturally competent practice, they need to ask the question - what is culture? "Culture" in social work discourse in the Euro-American context has been commonly equated with non-Western or minority groups or conflated with ethnicity, race, religion, and nationality. More recently, the concept of culture is extended beyond race and ethnicity to denote groups of people with distinctive values, beliefs, and ways of life. The Social Work Dictionary (Barker, 2014) defines culture as *"the customs, habits, skills, technology, arts, values, ideology, science, and religious and political behaviour of a group of people in a specific time period"* (p. 103). In addition to ethnicity, race, language, and religious status, culture also captures gender and gender identity, age, ability, spirituality, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

However, it is pertinent for social work practitioners and educators to reflect on a personal level 'what does culture mean to me?' Guided by the work of anthropologists, we can think of culture as a cognitive map we use to guide

behaviour and interpret experience (Barth, 1995). Culture could be conceptualised as the organised system of knowledge and belief whereby people structure their experience and perceptions, formulate acts and choose between alternatives (Keesing & Strathern 1998). Culture is therefore reflected and expressed by our worldview, the way we relate to people and nature; the meaning and beliefs we attach to family and kinship, child rearing and parenting, social and gender roles, health, and mental health reflect our culture. Our culture is embedded in what we celebrate and how we view life and death. To put it simply, culture is in the mundane practices of everyday life.

The above perspective of culture resonates with the recent writing by Airhihwenbuwa et al. (2020), a public health specialist, on the relationship between culture and health, and specifically on the global response to COVID-19, as below:

> Culture exists where we live, work, play, pray, and learn. Culture is a collective sense of consciousness that influence and condition perceptions, behaviours, and power and how these are shared and communicated.

> (Airhihwenbuwa et al. 2020: 2)

When we look at culture this way, it dawns on us that the pandemic cuts right into the core of our culture. We need to change how we greet people, our elders, our children, our peers; the ways we observe our festivals, the ways we celebrate marriage - the union between two people, the ways we bid goodbye to the passing of our loved ones. As we reflect on culture, we realise that culture is present in our everyday life. Each and everyone have a culture!

Culture impacts how we perceive life challenges and define and resolve problems in life. In exploring the cultural response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the help-seeking behaviour model proposed by Green (1999), adapted from the seminal works of medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1980, 1988), offers a way of understanding how cultural knowledge, attitude, and belief influence the meaning of a problem for a person or groups of people, and in turn impact the way the problem is acted upon. This conceptual framework provides a powerful tool for understanding cultural determinants of social issues and problems for social work practice to be relevant to the community we work with (Bassoumah & Ling, 2017; Nur Aida, 2020). This is similar to the KAP (knowledge, attitude, practice) model, which has been used widely in health and social care sectors to identify the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour patterns toward specific public

health issues to develop effective interventions and policies (Lee *et al.* 2021, UNICEF, Malaysia, 2017).

Social Work as a culture and social work practice as an intersection of different cultures

Following the above perspective of culture, Green (1999) argues that social work can be thought of as having a culture; or even a step further of seeing social work as a culture. We think of social work as having a distinctive set of values, a recognisable language, a body of knowledge and distinctive tradition, and a set of institutions and activities for maintaining the profession's identity (Green, 1999, Cited in Ling et al., 2014). Viewing social work as a culture reorients us to thinking of social work practice as an intersection of different cultures. In day-to-day practice, social workers 'bring' their own culture and the social work (professional) culture, the agency's organisational culture, to work with the clients who also come with their own culture.

Viewed in this way, culturally competent practice is therefore not just about individual social workers having the knowledge and skills to respond to people from a different culture, but more about *"a systemic approach to practice that operates at the micro (individual), meso (institutional), and macro (community) levels"* (Harrison, 2014, p.32). A well-accepted definition of cultural competence is *"a set of congruent practice skills, behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations"* (Lum, 2013, citing Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1997, p.1).With this understanding, we will now turn to look at the different approaches of cultural competence and explore the strengths and limitations of each in addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic.

Cultural competence: which approach?

Three major approaches, cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and power analysis approach, are explored, focusing on how each can provide social workers with different lenses to view people's experiences in meeting the problems posed by the pandemic.

Cultural knowledge approach

The cultural knowledge approach is based on the assumption that different cultural groups have distinctive characteristics. Therefore, social workers are

exhorted to acquire knowledge of the cultural characteristics of different cultural groups, mainly in family relationships and child-rearing practices, and to learn culturally specific techniques. The Ethnic-sensitive practice (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999); ethnocultural perspective is an example of cultural knowledge approach. The strength of this approach is that knowledge of different cultural groups can be used as a frame of reference to guide us on how we relate to the group and individuals or families from that group as well as how we conduct assessments and plans of action.

Using this approach to explore how each community group reacts to the pandemic implies that there are ways distinctive to each cultural group. It would be assumed that in our Malaysian society, there is a Malay way, a Chinese way, an Indian way, an *Iban* way, a *Kadazan-Dusun* or an *Orang Asli* way, and so on. This would also imply that, for example, a Malay social worker would know precisely the experiences of a Malay client or family. Likewise, a social worker of one ethnic-cultural background will know how people of the same cultural background react and deal with the situations posed by the pandemic. This assumption undeniably sheds light on the cultural knowledge approach's limitations.

In contrast, knowledge of the beliefs and behaviours of one's own or other cultural groups may serve as a frame of reference. It runs the risk of cultural stereotyping and ignores culture as being dynamic. The idea that each cultural group has distinctive characteristics is untenable, particularly in Malaysia; conversely, social workers need to consider every encounter with their clients cross-cultural (Ling, 2007a).

Cultural awareness approaches

The cultural awareness approach advanced by Green (1999) and Lum (2011) focuses on developing social workers' self-awareness of their own attitudes and values towards cultural differences. Knowledge of other cultures is less emphasised, instead, social workers are urged to engage in a process of becoming deeply aware of their own personal cultural assumptions and biases in order to be open to other cultural points of view. The strengths of this approach are that it challenges ethnocentrism, the belief that one's own culture is superior - as a standard against which to judge and measure all other cultures. It promotes cultural relativism - the principle that all cultures are valid in their own right.

Using this approach to understand the knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP) of the pandemic by different groups would means that we should view each community's ways as right in their own way. While this approach goes a long way for social workers to become sensitive to the differences in especially minority Indigenous groups, it also raises serious questions of what practices are considered right and valid. A case example below serves to illustrate different issues.

> In the state of Gujarat in western India, some believers have been going to cow shelters once a week to cover their bodies in cow dung and urine in the hope it will boost their immunity against, or help them recover from, the coronavirus. In Hinduism, the cow is a sacred symbol of life and the earth, and for centuries. Hindus have used cow dung to clean their homes and for prayer rituals, believing has therapeutic and antiseptic properties.
>
> (TheStar,https://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2021/05/1 1/indian-doctors-warn-against-cow-dung-as-covid-cure)

Many of us would find such practice appalling, and common-sense medical advice tells us that this exposes the person to various health risks and the risk of spreading COVID-19 itself. This highlights a limit to respecting and condoning cultural beliefs when the practices attached to the beliefs are detrimental to the well-being of the persons and others around them. On the other hand, the cultural awareness approach teaches us that in times of crisis and uncertainty, there is a tendency for people to turn to traditional knowledge and food to strengthen themselves, to religion and religious beliefs to seek protection; and to reconnect with their community for security and support.

Another question that comes to mind is when people turn to traditional knowledge and practice in times like the COVID-19 pandemic, to what extent is it because of the lack of information and inaccessibility or unavailability of resources and facilities? Is it because of the social-structural factors which pose barriers to groups and communities accessing and receiving formal support services? It is particularly pertinent to explore the situations faced by minority groups and populations living in Malaysian society today.

Therefore, the issue of social justice and social equity must be considered when we consider competent practice with diverse groups and cultures. It is worth noting that proponents of cultural knowledge and cultural awareness approach

also consider issues of accessibility and equity in varying degrees in the 4th edition of Lum's book on Culturally competent practice: A framework for understanding diverse groups, 'justice issues' was added into it (Lum, 2011). It is, therefore, most opportune to turn to the third approach - the power analysis approach.

Power analysis approach

The power analysis approach does not focus on culture or cultural differences; instead, it emphasises the importance of social workers understanding the unequal power relations that marginalise minority groups. The anti-racist, anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002; Thompson, 2006) developed in the United Kingdom is exemplary in forging a power analysis approach. This approach shifts focus from ethnicity to minority and vulnerable societal groups, from cultural differences to political, economic, and social structural inequity. The strength of this approach is that it highlights issues of inclusion and accessibility, as well as social work core principles of human rights and social justice, pointing to the need for social workers to challenge policy and procedural processes at the organisational and institutional levels.

This approach has particular relevance for social work practice in this pandemic; While COVID-19 does not discriminate, some are at greater risk, especially those who work and live in crowded poor housing conditions; and those who do not have access to public health facilities or information. For example, the minority indigenous communities and foreign workers. Concerted effort to resolve the issue of inequity in the provision of health care, housing, and education which subjects ethnic minority groups in remote rural regions and migrant workers to disadvantage, is becoming even greater importance. The limitation of this approach is its lack of appreciation of culture as a source of strength and community empowerment. Moreover, social workers' exclusive use of this approach may alienate them from the community.

The Way Forward to Promoting Culturally Competent Social Work Practice

How do we move forward in light of the above discussion of the three approaches to cultural competence? The three approaches have both strengths and limitations, and each offers a way to understand the issue of cultural differences and work competently across and within cultures, whichever group a social worker may be from. Knowledge of other cultures, knowledge of our own culture (personal and professional social work culture), and structural analysis of

minority issues are merits in offering a culturally competent perspective of working with people. Cultural knowledge of different cultural groups can serve as a frame of reference, but this knowledge should not preclude the exploration of the individual uniqueness and heterogeneity within cultural groups. We need to be culturally aware of our assumptions and how this impact how we perceive other cultures; at the same time, respect for other cultures does not mean that we condone all practices even if they contravene human dignity and human rights.

In the current pandemic situation, applying the cultural knowledge approach implies that we need to know the cultural views of the persons we work with. The cultural awareness approach entails seeing things from each culture's perspective and understanding that our views come from a particular culture (our cultural heritage, social work perspective, and organisations and agencies policies and practices). While knowledge and awareness provide us with a vantage point to view the situation, we are mindful of the impact of the pandemic on different minority groups and the structural inequality and barriers they face. These include low-income communities, women, persons and children with disabilities, older persons, minority indigenous groups, people living with HIV (PLHIV), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) groups, foreign workers, and undocumented persons and children. The impact of the closing down of activities due to the pandemic has particularly affected low-wage workers and those in the informal sector, including youth and women, who are often in precarious or temporary jobs and lack access to social protection, paid sick leave or lost earnings support. Anti-discriminatory practice is particularly relevant given stigmatisation and discrimination towards affected persons, resulting in delays in seeking treatment or help (Bruns, 2020).

Special attention should also be given to women as they bear the brunt of the negative impact of COVID-19. Firstly, women comprise the bulk of poor, low-income, and self-employed workers who have been left out of the emergency employment relief. Secondly, the burden of caring for children, including children with disabilities and older persons in the family, has fallen on women's shoulders at least doubled in times of movement restriction order. Finally, and most concerning, is the rise of domestic violence which has been described as a shadow pandemic. Economic distress, job losses, and COVID-19-related health concerns often mean women are trapped in homes with their abusers, with decreased access to shelters and psychological support. The rise in domestic and intimate partner violence further reflects existing social and cultural attitudes and norms that relegate women to a marginalised position (UNFPA Malaysia, 2021).

Rethinking and diversifying our service delivery and programme provisions methods

In order to be able to reach out to the groups and communities who are most in need of care and support, we need to be thinking of our service delivery methods. Indeed, a move towards online services, virtual case management, and counselling support is one way to reach those who need our services. However, the challenges of accessibility for rural and low-income communities, older persons, and persons with disabilities remain one issue that confronts social workers. Children from specific communities may be further disadvantaged, as shown in the case of the 18-year-old university student Veveonah in Sabah, who had to climb a tree to gain Internet access to sit for online exams during RMCO in June 2020 (BBC news, 2020). Veveonah is only among many students in different parts of rural Malaysia, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak, where internet connectivity is a problem. Many of these students' learning and education is being affected by the issue of the digital divide. Online classes depend significantly on the home environment, computing equipment, and internet access speed. This issue of structural inequality warrants social workers to turn on the power analysis lens for effective intervention and programme planning. Social work practice, therefore, needs to be constantly improvising and innovating in order to be able to reach out to people with their varying needs and challenges in life. Therefore, CARE requires us to constantly '**C**reating, **A**dapting, **R**einventing, and **E**volving.'

Concluding remarks: We are all in this together!

The 2021 World Social Work Day's theme "**Ubuntu: I am Because We are – Strengthening Social Solidarity and Global Connectedness**"

> *...is a powerful message on the need for solidarity at all levels: within communities, societies and globally. It is a message that all people are interconnected and that the future is dependent on recognizing all people's involvement in co-building a sustainable, fair and socially just future.*

> (https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/world-social-work-day-2021/)

Professional social workers are to forge solidarity among Malaysians of diverse social-cultural backgrounds from various regions. We should further nurture 'Unity in diversity - our strength as a society. We would also do well by collaborating with

all other helping professionals, particularly those in health and education, and together we develop and promote many ways of helping. Our role in community empowerment is crucial, and our practice aims to build bridges - enabling access to human needs and life opportunities. In our quest for professional and culturally competent practice, let us make our guiding principles be wholeness as opposed to fragmentation, harmony as opposed to conflict, liberation as opposed to oppression, creativity as opposed to destruction, and peace as opposed to violence.

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