Ethnic-Sensitive Practice: Contradictions and Recommendations

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SUMMARY. This article identifies some of the contradictions at the theoretical, attitudinal, and behavioral levels that are inherent in current approaches to ethnic-sensitive practice, including: (1) diversity and the history of the profession; (2) ethnicity as a credential; (3) the differential status of minority groups; and (4) the reliance on self-awareness. Recommendations are presented to stimulate thinking outside and beyond the box, such as redefining and expanding approaches to ethnic-sensitive practice; creating agency environments that support ethnic-sensitive practice; and expanding ethnic-sensitive practice to include a focus on the structures, institutions, and policies that are required for the sustained implementation of ethnic-sensitive practice.

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INTRODUCTION

The following discussion illuminates some of the contradictions and challenges that face the profession today as it attempts to provide ethnic-sensitive services. Contradictions can denote opposition, denial, inconsistency, and incongruity (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 2005). Some are of a historical nature while others are in the realm of theoretical underpinnings, attitudes, and behaviors. The identification of these issues is a necessary first step in the problem-solving process. This discussion is not about finger-pointing but, rather, about identifying issues so that fingers can be pointed in the appropriate direction for resolution. For this reason, each contradiction is followed by a recommendation for addressing it.

Background

It has been argued that unprecedented demographic changes coupled with greater visibility of racial/ethnic differences contribute to a need for competent practitioners who are skilled in working with diverse clients (Dhooper & Moore, 2001; Fong, 2004; Lum, 2003; Pumariega et al., 2005). The transformation of the American population is certainly indisputable. The United States Census Bureau (2006) noted that about one in every three United States residents is a member of a non-White group. Furthermore, the Census Bureau (2007), in a press release that reflects the news-worthiness of the information, announced that the minority population in the United States had surpassed 100 million. Hispanic residents are the largest minority group (44.3 million), followed by African Americans (40.2 million); Asians (14.9 million); American Indian and Alaska Natives (4.5 million); and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders (one million). Non-Hispanic White residents number about 199 million of the total population.

This ethnic/racial diversity appears to have the potential of altering the way social workers learn and practice their profession. This alteration is due, in part, to society and the profession’s heightened awareness of the multitude of ways in which race/ethnicity affect intergroup attitudes, behaviors, and communication.
Although the merits and virtues of a multicultural and ethnic-sensitive education are widely debated, many in the field of social work apparently endorse education as a necessary intervention (Swank et al., 2001). This endorsement is visible in the growing body of literature on the development of models for teaching ethnic-sensitive social work practice (Swank et al., 2001). Examples of this growing body of work include Bankhead and Erlich (2005), Cox and Ephross (1998), Dhooper and Moore (2001), Hyde (1998), Jacobs and Bowles (1998), Lowery (2002), and Williams (2005).

Because the number of ethnic/racial minority groups in American society is too large for any worker to be knowledgeable about all of them (Cox & Ephross, 1998), emergent educational models often espouse a framework that is designed to be applicable across groups (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Adams & Schlesinger, 1998; Devore, 2001; Lee & Greene, 2003). According to Lee and Greene (2003), some publications do target specific groups and provide instruction and research for social work practice with them. Work by Dhooper and Moore (2006), Fong (2004), and Stutters and Ligon (2001) would fall into this category.

**Definition of Terms Used**

A number of varying terms are used to capture social work with diverse populations. For example, “diversity practice” is broad enough to include groups defined by race/ethnicity, religious identification, sexual orientation, physical ability, social class, or age. “Multicultural practice” and “cultural competence” denote practice that is sensitive to the values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, folkways, behavior styles, and traditions that unite a group of people (Pinderhughes, 1989) and can also include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other aspects of a group’s experiences that influence its worldview (Lum, 2003). Workers may engage in diversity practice and multicultural practice with White clients and communities that have traits and characteristics that define them as diverse and multicultural.

This article uses the term “ethnic-sensitive practice” to capture practice with, or on behalf of, ethnic/racial minority individuals and groups. “Ethnicity” encompasses social and psychological identity, values, norms, culture (language, food, dress, art, music) religion, and nationality (Cox & Ephross, 1998; Pinderhughes, 1989). “Race” denotes the biological and physical characteristics that separate one group from another and can have an ethnic dimension if group members have a defined way of life (Pinderhughes, 1989). “Minority” is used here to refer
to non-White groups that differ in characteristics from the larger society and are subjected to differential treatment (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 2005). Thus, Hispanics represent an ethnic minority group while African Americans, American Indians, Asians, Southeast Asians, and Pacific Islanders are racial minority groups. All are recognized as minority groups (Kim, 2003). This clarification is necessary because a number of terms are frequently used that may or may not have the same meaning. Ethnic-sensitive practice places the spotlight front and center on the ethnic and racial minority status of the client and client groups. Also, “minorities” will be used to mean ethnic and racial minority groups.

This background serves as the framework for considering the contradictions surrounding ethnic-sensitive practice and the framework for positing potential resolutions.

**CONTRADICTIONS IN ETHNIC-SENSITIVE PRACTICE**

While an emphasis on ethnic-sensitive practice is a testament to the profession’s commitment to the provision of relevant, responsive services, a focus on teaching practitioners how to become more racially and ethnically sensitive only partially addresses issues in service delivery to ethnic/racial minorities. In the quest for relevant and effective service delivery, current identified approaches often mask a host of complexities and conundrums that accompany inter-ethnic/racial interactions.

**Contradiction #1: Society Has Always Been Diverse**

While the attention on ethnic-sensitive practice may be in response to the changing American racial/ethnic landscape, it is worth noting that American society has always been diverse. Diversity may not have historically existed the way it does currently, but the very origins of the social work profession are tied to the massive immigration of White ethnics to America—White ethnics who did not conform to the image of the “real” American. Iglehart and Becerra (1995) describe at length the role of this massive immigration in the development of the social work profession. These authors also provide an overview of the circumstances of other ethnic and racial groups in America during and after the Progressive Era and the nascent profession’s response to them.

A major difference between then and now is not the existence of diversity in society but, rather, the responses to this diversity. With the
White ethnics, there was a belief that, over time, they would become assimilated into American society to the degree that their ethnicity would no longer be visible, and they would transform into true Americans. This assimilation would, of course, take a generation or two, but the outcome was the expected to yield the American melting pot. Thus, the Americanization movement supported efforts to eradicate the evidence of ethnicity and ethnic culture among the White ethnics by exposing them to the American way of life.

For groups that defied melting into the pot because they wore their ethnicity or race on their faces and in their culture, the profession had a variety of responses (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995). These responses included everything from denial of the group’s existence to segregation and outright discrimination. Minority groups located in the West and Southwest were literally outside of the new profession’s reach—a reach that was primarily associated with the burgeoning urbanization of the East.

In a content analysis of the literature on social work with minorities, DeVore (2001) and McMahon and Allen-Meares (1992) came to the same conclusion: social work seemed to have little interest in minorities and, when minorities were mentioned, there was a failure to address their social context. Lum (2003) defines context as the essential elements of an individual and his/her environment. For ethnic/racial minority groups, the social context would include stressors and their sources—both internal and external to the individual. By ignoring or minimizing the social context, the profession was, therefore, ignoring and minimizing the structural, institutional, and social factors that shape the minority group experience.

For some, this could mean that social work as a profession was racist, because to disregard a minority group’s social context is to deny the role of discrimination in shaping their life experiences. Discounting the social context may seem reasonable, however, if few or no interventions are directed at the structural and institutional causes of problems. After all, social work as a profession is dominated by an emphasis on individual-level interventions (Haynes & Mickelson, 2006; Iglehart & Becerra, 1995; Leiby, 1978; Jansson, 2008; Martin & Martin, 1995). What appears as racism may actually be the nature of the profession itself—emphasis on individual-level practice.

For others, a lack of attention to social context may be reflective of the color-blind approach to social problems and service interventions. Color blindness denotes a sameness across populations (Bankhead & Erlich, 2005; Donnelly et al., 2005) so that problem definitions and
problem solutions are unaffected by the characteristics of the clients. This is the “one-size-fits-all” notion that similar intervention techniques can be utilized with an array of problems and an array of populations (Bankhead & Erlich, 2005). In the color blind world, social context would have little or no relevance.

Regardless of whether social work has historically been racist or color blind in its dealings with ethnic/racial minority groups, the result is still the same: the social context of minority group has been minimized or disregarded in the development of sound intervention strategies. This is the history of the profession. With the growth of minority populations, the profession is making strides to alter its responses to these groups.

**Recommendation #1: The Profession Should Accept Its Past**

The past is the past and no effort at rewriting will erase it. One needed step in making peace with this past is acknowledging and accepting that the profession has made some mistakes and miscalculations as it has evolved. If past attempts to work with diverse populations mean that the profession was less sympathetic and less empathic than previously thought, then this admission is a step toward recovery and healing. Situations and circumstances do change, and the profession is changing along with them. Cox and Ephross (1998) cogently note that social workers are not expected to be perfect. In actuality, neither they nor the profession can lay claim to perfection. Using today’s sensibilities, however, to accept, understand, and interpret the past can fortify the profession against perpetuating the same mistakes. These sensibilities should incorporate what Wright and Anderson (1998) identified as a need for the inclusion of clients’ sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in the service delivery process.

Instruction and training in ethnic-sensitive practice can be enhanced and more relevant when content on the profession’s history is highlighted. With this content, learners gain an understanding of the profession’s evolving efforts in service delivery to ethnic and racial minority groups. This knowledge base places workers in the context of the profession so that they know that the issues confronting them as individuals are also ones that have historically confronted the profession. Workers can then realize that, in becoming more ethnic-sensitive practitioners, they are growing as individual practitioners while also serving to advance the profession.
Contradiction #2: Ethnicity Is Still a Credential

The imparting of knowledge about ethnic-sensitive practice assumes that all practitioners can be taught to work with ethnic and racial minority individuals and communities. This assumption rings hollow in the face of historical and voluminous literature that touts the value of group members working with and taking care of their own. Evidence of this was recorded as far back as 1902 when the first African American woman was hired as a social worker with a New York Charity Organization Society. The COS secretary recognized the value of using African Americans for work among their own people, whose problems they could understand and whose needs they could well interpret (Jones, 1928).

Merton (1972) refers to an “insider doctrine” that polarizes society by boasts of each group having a claim to a monopoly of knowledge about itself. He noted that ascribed status was becoming a new credentialism. Variations on this theme abound and include the often quoted line, “You have to be one in order to understand one” (Merton, 1972, p. 15). This insider doctrine is so pervasive that examples are readily available. In one issue of the Los Angeles Times alone, two items appeared that capture the thrust of the doctrine. One item reported a lawsuit filed against Bank of America Corporation by five current and former minority employees alleging that the bank regularly assigned them to largely minority neighborhoods (Los Angeles Times, 2007). The other item was a letter to the editor penned by a California State Senator asserting that race matters in representative government. He also supported the efforts of African Americans to elect an African American to fill a vacant congressional seat in a district with 26 percent African American, 49 percent White, 19 percent Hispanic, and five percent Pacific Islander (Ridley-Thomas, 2007). The letter writer notes that voters tend to vote for candidates who are like them and share their concerns.

Ethnic/racial minority groups often form one group and White practitioners make up another group. As outsiders to the minority group, White social workers may have to work a great deal harder to prove that they are understanding, accepting, and unbiased. Even with the most diligent of effort, there may still be some hint of doubt and tension between the worker and client that may defy resolution.

The insider doctrine has been supported by empirical evidence. One such example is the research of Garcia and Van Soest (2000). In using vignettes to study faculty responses to critical classroom incidents about race, they found that ethnic minority professors selected answers
that had higher responsiveness levels than did other groups. These researchers suggest that discriminatory experiences due to racial identity may be a factor in this outcome. In addition, they theorize that being exposed to oppression may enable individuals to empathize more and be more open to dealing with this topic. These findings could also lead to the conclusion that minority instructors are better able to impart knowledge about ethnic-sensitive practice than non-minority instructors.

Another example lies in the research on ingroup interactions. Kaiser (2003), in a qualitative study of a Hmong community, concluded that the context of culturally explicit communication patterns and the rules for communication contribute to the complexities of service delivery with this group. The rules and context may be difficult for an outsider to comprehend. Weathers et al. (2002) found that race influences the interpretation of emotional cues and members of minority groups are more accurate in their interpretations of other group members’ meanings. This could mean that, in social work practice, the minority practitioner is a more accurate interpreter of facial expressions and verbal communication patterns of members of his/her group. The minority practitioner may also be skilled in deciphering ingroup dialogue that is laced with subtext and hidden meanings.

The assumption that minority groups would rather take care of their own is still held by some practitioners. For example, Donnelly et al. (2005), in a study of battered women’s shelters in several Southern states, found that respondents thought that women of color preferred to handle problems in their own communities and did not always need services from mainstream (White) agencies.

When taken a degree further, the assumption that minority groups prefer to handle problems in their own communities may support the development of the ethnic agency (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995). Studies have indeed shown that ethnic/racial minority group members do better in ethnic agencies. This “do better” is captured in less premature termination and better client outcomes for these agencies (Hohman & Galt, 2001; Holley, 2003; Schrover & Vermeulen, 2005; Uba, 1982; Yeh et al., 1994; Zane, 1994). Holley (2003) suggests that outsiders can provide capacity building assistance and serve as advocates rather than provide direct service.

Theoretical literature also gives credence to the insider doctrine. Social identity theory (SIT) has been widely used throughout the discipline of psychology and adopted by popular culture (Brown, 2000; Hogg, 2006). It provides some fairly quick and easy explanations for why individuals appear to prefer to interact with and be around members of their
own groups. With SIT, group identification, ingroup bias, intergroup discrimination, self-esteem, and stereotyping can be explained through group membership that gives rise to social identity. SIT distinguishes between personal and social identity with an emphasis on the social identity. It helps to explain why members of the same group can be found clustering together in schools, religious organizations, communities, work-site lunchrooms, and other locations in which the individual is able to use her/his discretion is selecting those with whom to interact.

SIT applies to all groups, not just to minority ones. Green et al. (2005), in a study of 257 White social workers’ attitudes about people of color, found that the majority of respondents had positive attitudes about diversity. As a matter of fact, their attitudes were more positive than those of the public. Although White social workers were supportive of workforce equality for people of color, many were hesitant to express a desire for more closeness with them. Indeed, 85 percent of the respondents indicated that most of their best friends were from their own racial group.

If individuals prefer members of their own groups, and if this is the “natural order” of social contact, then ethnic-sensitive social work practice may be paddling against an overpowering current. While ethnic-sensitive instruction and education are offered, they may be insufficient in countering the insider doctrine and social identity theory.

**Recommendation #2: Ethnic Credential Should Be Discussed**

The ethnicity credential may be the elephant in the room that no one acknowledges; yet, most people may harbor some degree of adherence to it. When White practitioners speak on topics of race and ethnicity, there may be the unspoken question, “Why is s/he talking about this? What makes her/him an expert?” To openly raise this question may provoke reactions of defensiveness or even anger. In this climate of diversity, however, practitioners must not shy away from asking the difficult questions or raising the difficult issues. Giving voice to widely held thoughts may be a necessary first step to understanding the complexities of intergroup behavior.

Practitioners need to explore the circumstances that benefit from ethnic matching and those that do not. Not all clients want a worker who looks like them, and not all workers want a client who looks like them. The desired state of affairs could be one that allows for the exercise of choice. Perhaps a reasonable goal is for agencies to be able to meet the preferences of clients and workers regardless of what that preference
may be. If this is the case, then the meaning and contribution of the ethnic credential to service delivery should be fully understood. Through acknowledging and accepting human behavior and all of its underpinnings, there is a greater openness to exploring the ethnic credential and its place, if any, in social work.

Contradiction #3: All Minority Groups Are Not the Same

The development of models for teaching ethnic-sensitive practice seems to imply that there is a similarity across all minority groups. The “sameness” approach emphasizes the commonalities across groups. This perspective may be necessary since the actual number of groups would exceed a worker’s capacity to become expert in all of them. Dhopper and Moore (2001), for example, assert that many of these groups may differ from mainstream Americans in the following areas: meaning of family; place of religion; experience as Americans; poverty and lower economic status; level of acculturation; and culture-related disorders.

Teaching models highlight the knowledge and skills crucial for work with minorities. The knowledge is used to promote and support understanding in such areas as self, culture, cultural diversity, empowerment, ecological perspective, racism, power, prejudice, and oppression (Bankhead & Erlich, 2005; Cox & Ephross, 1998; Furuto, 2004; Lee & Greene, 2003; Lum, 2003b; Pinderhughes, 1989). The skills that are linked to ethnic-sensitive practice can include: communication and interviewing skills; assessment skills; process skills; conceptualization skills; mobilizing skills; and skills in participatory and evaluative research (Bankhead & Erlich, 2005; Cox & Ephross, 1998; Dhopper & Moore, 2001; Lum & Lu, 2003; Pinderhughes, 1989).

This knowledge development and skill acquisition do not broach the topic of status differential found among minority groups. While these groups may share the designation of “minority,” they do not share the same status in American society. Each group has its own unique history, social context, and interface with White America. For example, Asian Americans are often considered the model minority—well-adjusted and with few psychological problems (Chen et al., 2003). This stereotype holds that they excel academically, are economically secure, and defeat barriers with family support and a strong work ethic (Cunanan et al., 2006). Thus, they may be victims of the benign neglect of the profession because of assumptions that they do not need social work assistance and that they take care of their own. While benign neglect is itself a form of
discrimination, it is quite different from the discrimination faced by other minority groups.

Iglehart and Becerra (1995) detail the unique histories of America’s minority groups. The social context, history, strengths, and needs of each group can differ markedly. Hispanic Americans have a history that is shaped by issues of immigration status that sharply divides the group into native born and foreign born. Native Americans’ history is etched in efforts to eradicate an entire people. African Americans struggle to overcome a past marked by slavery, Jim Crow laws, and other overt acts of discrimination.

Models of teaching ethnic sensitive practice fail to take into account that some minorities are preferred over others in America. Dixon (2006), in a study that utilized survey and census data, revealed that the presence of large numbers of African Americans living near White respondents heightened their prejudice. African Americans represented a threat that raised levels of fear and hostility among this White population. The researcher also found that large numbers of Hispanics or Asians did not elicit the same response among the White respondents. As a matter of fact, White respondents who knew Hispanics and Asians were less prejudiced against them. This did not hold true for African Americans. Propinquity bred harmony for Hispanics and Asians, but hostility for African Americans.

African Americans appear to stand out among minority groups. The reasons for this may be tied to their history of slavery, discrimination, political mobilization, and continuous low rates on quality of life indicators. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2007), California has 21 percent of the nation’s minority population—the largest percent of any state. In comparison to Asians and Hispanics, African Americans in this state have higher poverty rates, unemployment rates, death rates in general, and infant death rates in particular (California Legislative Black Caucus, 2007). They also have lower home ownership rates and a lower household median income. On a national level, the African American population is also more segregated from non-Hispanic White population than are other minority groups (Iceland & Wilkes, 2006).

Many African Americans may think that terms such as “diversity” and “multiculturalism” shift attention from their needs to those of other groups. They may feel that their issues should have priority over those of other groups (Iglehart & Becerra, 1995). Surveys have found that many African American respondents believed that: (a) they are entitled to reparation from the government; (b) the democratic process should be altered in a manner that favors more responsiveness to their needs;
(c) they still suffer as a result of slavery and Jim Crow laws; (d) social class does not protect them from personal discrimination; and (e) the federal government is responsible for addressing inequities in employment, education, and health care (Chong & Kim, 2006; McGary, 2003).

White Americans may also define African Americans as the premier minority group and expect ameliorative strategies to specifically target this group. As Brown noted (1997), some people define race in terms of issues between the White and African American populations. This position may be a response to this group’s political advocacy, outspoken leaders, White America’s greater knowledge of this group than of other minority groups, and greater visibility throughout American history.

Commonalities do exist across minority groups; however, the differences between groups and how they are perceived by White America may be other issues that are virtually ignored.

**Recommendation #3: Differences Should Be Acknowledged**

Between group differences are significant enough to affect each group’s interface with the larger society. Another step toward understanding the complexities of intergroup contact involves recognizing that all minority groups do not share a common status. Open discussion of these variations is one step toward creating an environment that fosters frankness and sharing. These discussions should include the topic of intergroup tensions and ways of resolving them. The questions of what determines group entitlement and whether one group has priority over another cannot be swept aside to avoid conflict. These discussions may not lead to answers, but they should lead to a greater understanding of the issues.

**Within** group differences also require more attention. The use of broad categorizations such as Asian Americans and Hispanics masks the heterogeneity found within these categorizations. Numerous researchers advocate for the disaggregating of sweeping categories so that greater attention can be devoted to more specialized intervention (Castex, 1994; Kim, 2006; Kramer & Nash, 1995; Leong et al., 1995; Tran & Dhooper, 1996).

**Contradiction #4: Self-Awareness Is Not the Key**

In ethnic-sensitive social work practice, self-awareness reigns as the critical, essential, crucial, and necessary element (Dhooper & Moore, 2001; Lee & Greene, 2003; Pinderhughes, 1989). Social workers are
assumed to need to explore, examine, question, and be aware of their own assumptions, attitudes, behaviors, and values in order to be receptive to and benefit from ethnic-sensitive learning. Much of the teaching and training used for ethnic-sensitive practice devotes significant time to self-awareness discussion and self-awareness exercises.

Self-awareness discussions and exercises, however, are deemed crucial for White practitioners who are blind to their whiteness and the status it affords them (Adams & Schlesinger, 1988; Pinderhughes, 1989). Apparently, as White individuals, they must learn about culture (their own and that of others), diversity, social injustice, and oppression in order to grow as ethnic-sensitive practitioners. Differential treatment and numerous other forms of racism and discrimination make minority group members keenly aware of their color, culture, and other characteristics. Although ethnic/racial awareness becomes firmly stamped on the psyche of minority groups, awareness of whiteness seems to be missing for many within the White population. This self-awareness seems to be needed for White social workers regardless of their area of practice. For example, according to Bankhead and Erlich (2005:64), White liberal community organizers have their own struggles, issues, and complexities that may diminish their effectiveness as social change agents with culturally different populations.

For White practitioners, self-awareness also means examining White privilege and its association with unearned advantage and domination (Lowery, 2002). According to Donnelly et al. (2005:6), White privilege refers to a system of benefits, advantages, and opportunities experienced by White persons in American society simply because of their skin color. Workers must, therefore, unlearn and undo those patterns associated with social privilege (Swigonski, 1996).

A focus on worker self-awareness and White privilege has often been met with resistance from White workers (Abrams & Gibson, 2007). This should not be surprising since many well-intentioned, well-educated workers are dismayed to be treated as if they were contributing to the “minority problem.” Placing White workers under the self-awareness microscope seems to imply some deficiency on their part. For workers who take pride in their open and supportive ethnic/racial attitudes and behaviors, this can come as quite a shock. Many feel justified in questioning the utility of the concept of White privilege and may extend that questioning to the validity of the instruction. Ethnic-sensitive trainers must then attempt to help learners move beyond their anger and anxiety so that the next stages of White identity development can be addressed (Abrams & Gibson, 2007). The resistance is
generally interpreted as discomfort that is necessary for growth, self-awareness, and transformation.

The unlearning of firmly entrenched attitudes and behaviors cannot take place in a classroom over a short period of time. It may take a long time for people to change beliefs they have had for most of their lives about their own and other people’s race and ethnicity—even when they are inaccurate (Bourjolly et al., 2005). In writing of the changing landscape of adult learning theory, Merriam (2004) reveals that learning has moved beyond being just a cognitive process located in the mind. The learning process is shaped by cultural, social, economic, and political forces. This could mean that bringing social workers together in a classroom-like setting to teach ethnic-sensitive practice ignores their social context and the social context of the learning process.

Pointing the finger at the worker has another major limitation. Worker attitudes are but one factor in the service delivery equation. Social work practice takes place in an organizational, community, and societal context. A change in worker attitudes may not result in a change in organizational structures and processes. A change in worker attitudes may not result in a change in the quality of life of minority communities. A change in worker attitudes may not result in a change in discriminatory or benign social policies. Some of the problems in service delivery to minority clients and communities may be the result of organizational practices that limit access, resources, and services for minorities. According to Holloway and Brager (1977), worker attitudes and behaviors may be too easily blamed for organizational problems, structures, programs, or ideology. People change appears to take priority over change at other system levels.

**Recommendation #4: An Expanded Focus Is Needed**

Focus should be expanded to include interventions that support ethnic-sensitive practice at the agency level. If ethnic-sensitive practice is placed in a systems perspective or in an ecological perspective, it is clear that the worker shares center stage with other actors and elements. As the profession continues to illuminate the need for effective ethnic-sensitive practice, these other elements should be drawn into the light. For example, in order for workers to engage in ethnic-sensitive practice, they will need support, encouragement, and incentives from the agency. Incentives are particularly important, because worker behaviors that are desired by the agency should be rewarded. Worker evaluations
have to assess the worker in areas of ethnic-sensitive practice and link rewards to effectiveness in these areas.

Examination of organizational structures and processes should be undertaken to uncover those that inhibit and impede ethnic-sensitive practice. Workers practice their profession in an organizational context and worker acquisition of new learning may be powerless in overcoming agency limitations. Agency recruitment and retention policies/practices, outreach strategies, and advocacy activities are key factors in ethnic-sensitive practice. Agencies have to assess their norms, behaviors, processes, culture, and modes of interacting with minority clients (Fong & Gibbs, 1995). Unfortunately, as Brown (1997, p. 225) noted, diversity training tends to conveniently avoid addressing the need for dramatic changes in most organizational cultures and power structures.

The commitment of agency leadership to ethnic-sensitive practice cannot be overlooked. Administrators must have leadership skills, vision, and commitment in order to move an agency closer to achieving the goals of ethnic-sensitive practice. In addition, ethnic-sensitive management of a diverse staff reaffirms the agency’s commitment to ethnic-sensitive worker-client relations. Workers who feel disempowered, alienated, or marginalized may not be receptive to any new learning the agency has to offer.

Focus should also be expanded to include elements outside of the agency. It may be difficult for an agency to engage in ethnic-sensitive practice if its task environment and general environment challenge that practice. Hasenfeld (1983) discusses these environments and provides their definitions. The task environment is a set of organizations and groups with which the organization exchanges resources and services while the general environment is composed of resources, population, technology, and culture. Because agencies are dependent on their environments (Hasenfeld, 1983; Schmid, 2004), practices occurring in the agency are influenced by the environment outside the agency. It may be virtually impossible for workers to offer ethnic-sensitive services if the task and general environments: (a) question this practice; (b) do not have positive regard for specific minority groups; (c) do not provide the necessary resources to support this practice; (d) and contain social policies that constrain and restrict worker efforts. As a consequence, advocacy at the community and policy levels becomes a crucial skill (Haynes & Mickelson, 2006).

When worker training is mandated, focus should expand to more fully include the training needs of minority workers when they are present in the agency. The assumption that the White worker is the only worker
who needs ethnic-sensitive training ignores minority workers. Within and between group differences suggest that minority workers also have their own attitudes and behaviors that can benefit from examination and exploration. Each group has its own biases toward other groups and toward its own subgroups. Minority group status does not render one immune to ethnic/racial bias. The profession should foster a more inclusive ideology toward ethnic-sensitive practice.

When White workers are the intended beneficiaries of ethnic-sensitive training, perhaps the focus should not include the concept of White privilege. The resistance of White workers to this concept may have some legitimacy. It may be viewed as an indictment against them and create many more problems than solutions. It may not be essential for White workers to recognize, accept, or embrace this concept as they learn the tools and techniques of ethnic-sensitive practice. The introduction of this concept may erect a barrier that drains time, attention, and energy from the educational goals. Race and ethnic issues are controversial enough without the injecting of additional controversy. Trainers and educators should ask themselves, “Can ethnic-sensitive practice be taught without the concept of White privilege?”

**CONCLUSION**

The profession can no longer persist in approaching ethnic-sensitive practice as something that can be primarily taught at the worker level and still expect major change. The profession’s social context dictates other interventions and other considerations. The United States has never been a race neutral society. Race and ethnicity pervade just about every aspect of society. In 1982, Hopps wrote that although many forms of exclusionary and discriminatory practices are numerous, “none is so deeply rooted, persistent, and intractable as that based on color” (Hopps, 1982, p. 3). Decades later, the intractability of race and ethnicity still exists. The issue of race and ethnicity is laden with emotion and surrounded by sensitivity. For these reasons, ethnic-sensitive practice cannot be taught the way other social work topics are taught.

The profession is altering its response to ethnic/racial diversity and that response should tackle an examination of the place of the ethnic credential in ethnic-sensitive practice, the differential status of minority groups, the over-reliance on self-awareness, and the need for intervention at other levels in the service delivery process. Ethnic-sensitive practice calls for open, frank discussions of between group and within
group issues, issues that can be quite controversial. It calls for both micro and macro interventions—interventions that pertain to workers, administrators, agencies, the larger community, and social policies. In its journey toward more effective ethnic-sensitive practice, pathways should entail the fostering of climates that support meaningful training/education, meaningful agency change, and meaningful community and policy advocacy.

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