



Receptivity and Readiness for Cultural Competence Training Amongst the Social Workers in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This research examined understandings of cultural competence of social workers in Hong Kong, their needs and challenges in serving culturally diverse groups, and their willingness and receptivity to receive cultural competence training by using constructivist grounded theory. Individual qualitative interviews were conducted with thirteen frontline and managerial practitioners and educators in training institutions in the social work profession. Data were analysed by identifying major themes. The findings show that social workers in Hong Kong tend to encounter language barriers and various forms of cultural shocks in serving ethnoculturally diverse clients. The professional code of practice is not sufficient in promoting culturally competent practice and there are institutional barriers to the enhancement of cultural competence of the social services. Mainstream social work units are generally not well prepared to provide services to non-Chinese communities. In response to these obstacles, professional training should provide future Hong Kong social workers with opportunities to interact with ethnoculturally diverse communities through service-learning. To tackle institutional racism, leaders should have cultural awareness and promote culturally inclusive practices. Inclusion of staff members from diverse cultural backgrounds would increase the capacity of the organisations to better serve clients of diverse needs. Anti-racism training should be made as an essential professional development component for social work students, practicum students, practitioners and managers.

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Introduction and background

Like many major cities in other parts of the world, Hong Kong has become a multicultural society. Whilst the population of over 7 million is mainly composed of local Chinese, the proportion of non-ethnic Chinese residents increased from 5 per cent in 2006 to 8 per cent in 2016 ([Census and Statistics Department, 2017](#)).

The government and most citizens usually consider Hong Kong a cosmopolitan city, which is officially positioned as ‘Asia’s World City’ and ‘offering global connectivity, security and rich diversity’ ([Brand Hong Kong, 2020](#), p. 1). However, core principles of multiculturalism, including equality of freedom and life chances, freedom from discrimination, mutual respect and receptiveness, are often missing in Hong Kong ([Law and Lee, 2012](#)). Previous research has indicated that ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong face multiple barriers in exercising their rights to health care due to language, cultural and social factors ([Health in Action, 2017](#)). Language remains the greatest barrier for ethnic minorities to access equitable health care services. In the past decade, a number of policy studies have described disadvantages and challenges facing non-Chinese ethnic minorities in areas of subjective well-being, equality in employment, job safety and discrimination. ([Caritas Hong Kong, 2007](#)). However, social service providers face limitations in providing sensitive and competent support to ethnoculturally diverse populations in areas such as family dynamics, job-seeking, poverty relief, social security applications and other social support ([Kapai, 2014](#)). [Kapai \(2014\)](#) pointed out that whilst setting up ‘special services’ targeting non-Chinese minorities could bring about segregated services, it may deflect from the overall goal of encouraging long-term social integration. It was suggested that there should be a policy of ‘mainstreaming ethnic minority services’.

Defining cultural competence and implementation in social work practice

[Este \(2007, p. 96\)](#) reviewed several definitions of cultural competence, seeking general consensus amongst them. Practitioners with cultural competence would: (i) have specific knowledge on social diversity and oppression in relation to attributes such as race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, (ii) be informed about different cultural and racial

groups, (iii) have empathy and communication skills to work with clients from diverse backgrounds and (iv) possess values that reflect a willingness and commitment to work effectively and ethically with different client systems (Este, 2007, p. 96). Lum (2011) has further defined cultural competence as the set of skills consisting of awareness and knowledge acquisition. Cultural awareness refers to a practitioner's awareness of the clients' heritage and cultural norms, whereas knowledge acquisition refers to the learning of the history, values and behavioural patterns of the ethnoculturally diverse clients (Lum, 2011; Danso, 2018). Yet being aware of diversity and having knowledge about different types of clients do not necessarily mean one is culturally competent unless awareness and knowledge are integrated into the professional self of the social workers. Culturally competent social workers should also be focusing on issues of social injustice whilst taking actions to promote sensitivity to and knowledge application about oppression and diversity. Being sensitive to the differences that exist between cultures also translates into the professional behaviour of not imposing subjective values to the differences (NASW, 2015). It is crucial for practitioners working in a culturally diverse environment to acquire cultural competence through enhancing one's cultural awareness and sensitivity, alongside gaining knowledge about clients' values, norms and heritage (Azzopardi and McNeill, 2016; Danso, 2018; Amorin-Woods, 2020) whilst putting the awareness and knowledge into individual and organisational practices under the social justice lenses.

Cultural competence in social work practice depends on the integration of cultural competence into social work curricula. Studies have found that cultural awareness and cultural competence in social work education can improve knowledge of cultural diversity and encourage students to work with diverse clients (Bender et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2013). Cultural competence education might include content on issues such as interactions with diverse groups through cultural immersion, partnerships and practicums with social work agencies, and community engagement strategies (Schmitz et al., 2001; Holley and Steiner, 2005; Hurtado, 2005; Dessel et al., 2006; Colvin-Burque et al., 2007; Chen, 2008; Snyder et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2013; Hong et al., 2013; Deepak et al., 2015).

For understanding the need for cultural competence in social work organisations, issues related to institutional racism have formed the foundation for further exploration and actions. Whilst social workers are generally trained with a justice perspective, organisational perspectives on issues and practices of promoting cultural competence are often hampered by the problem of institutional racism, which forms barriers to the fulfilment of the needs of ethnoculturally diverse clients (and sometimes staff members as well). Institutional racism refers to a structural bias in social systems and organisations (Walter et al., 2017). It is embedded in

the bureaucratic structure and the institutional environment that reflect cultural assumptions of dominant groups, resulting in policies and practices that produce an unequal outcome for clients and staff (Walter *et al.*, 2017). Institutional racism would lead to failure in providing culturally responsive services for clients with different cultural backgrounds (Blitz and Kohl, 2012).

Criticisms and challenges against the concept of cultural competence also prevail. Yeager and Bauer-Wu (2013) and Campbell (2015) pointed out that cultural competence has avoided a deeper appreciation and advanced understanding of the 'colour blindness' complexity of race and that it cannot fully produce competent professionals equipped to provide effective services to ethnic minority communities. Practitioners should have 'cultural humility', emphasising the importance of one to maintain an interpersonal stance that aspects of cultural identity are important to a person (Hook *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, Danso (2018) refuted that cultural humility lacks conceptual clarity and a coherent framework. It could not provide explicit guidelines for cross-cultural pedagogy. Instead, cultural competence could evolve as a dynamic tool for transformative social work.

Cultural competence and social work in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, the approach to social work education is Chinese-oriented. The lack of inter-cultural elements in social work education illustrates a gap in genuinely taking care of the needs of ethnoculturally diverse groups. The code of practice published by the [Social Workers Registration Board \(2018, p. 3\)](#) refers to cultural awareness and states that social workers should 'recognize the ethnic and cultural diversity of the communities being served' and 'be acquainted with and sensitive to the cultures of clients and appreciate the differences among them'. According to section 2.2 of the latest 'Principles, Criteria and Standards for Recognizing Qualifications in Social Work for Registration of Registered Social Workers' ([Social Workers Registration Board, 2014](#)), training institutions are expected to cover social welfare systems in Hong Kong, Mainland China and international communities. Yet there is no mention of the usage and access issues of culturally diverse communities in these social welfare systems. The concept of 'human behaviour and diversity' is the only explicitly listed knowledge area related to diversity that a social work training programme should include. Culture, ethnicity, immigrant populations and other ethnoculturally diverse groups are not mentioned at all in the curriculum content ([Social Workers Registration Board, 2014](#)). The Social Welfare Department in Hong Kong claims to provide cultural sensitivity training to social workers ([Home Affairs Department, 2013](#)), but the training only focuses on the characteristics of

ethnic minority groups, suitable service delivery and procedures to arrange translation and interpretation services (Social Welfare Department, 2009; Commission on Poverty, 2018).

Law and Lee (2016) discussed the compatibility and practicability of introducing ‘western’ values into Hong Kong’s social work practice with the aim of promoting inclusive practice for the rights and equality of ethnoculturally diverse groups. When serving ethnoculturally diverse clients, it is difficult to apply social work practices commonly adopted for serving Chinese clients. Moreover, it is not uncommon to see and hear Chinese social workers to express negative impressions of local non-Chinese groups, such as associating them with problems of domestic violence and substance use (Arat and Kerelian, 2019). Law and Lee (2016) attribute this stigmatisation to the limitations of social work education, which overlooks the mindsets and skills needed for embracing cultural diversity.

Research objective and questions

The research objective of this study was to examine social workers’ perspectives on cultural competence and their receptivity and readiness towards training on cultural competence with the aim of strengthening service provision to ethnoculturally diverse groups in Hong Kong. The research questions included:

1. What is the extent of cultural competence as perceived by social workers?
2. What are the needs and challenges of social workers in working with ethnoculturally diverse groups?
3. What are the best practices for providing cultural competence and related training and professional development, and what is their relevance to the Hong Kong context?
4. What are the facilitators and barriers related to the receptivity and readiness of social workers towards cultural competence training?
5. How could cultural competence be more effectively promoted and enhanced amongst social workers?

Analytical framework

Despite the critique of the models of cultural competence practice in social work (Yeager and Bauer-Wu, 2013; Campbell, 2015), a study of the receptivity and readiness for cultural competence training amongst the social workers in Hong Kong as first of its kind would contribute to

enhancing the capacity of the social work profession in an 'East meets West' practice context. Danso (2018) has argued that cultural competence could evolve as a dynamic tool for transformative social work. In Hong Kong, academic discussion over social work practice in multicultural settings is scant. Social exclusion and discrimination against non-white ethnic minorities were reported, despite the promotion of openness and racial harmony by the government (Law and Lee, 2012). This context has shaped this initial attempt to examine issues related to receptivity and readiness of the social workers in working with ethnoculturally diverse clients.

The Cultural Competence Attainment Model proposed by McPhatter (1997) was adopted as an analytical framework for this study. This model considers the ways in which practitioners can move towards cultural competence and views achievement of competence as a long-term, ongoing developmental process involving thinking, feeling, sensing and behaving:

1. 'Enlightened consciousness' involves reorienting or restructuring one's worldview and belief systems and considering aspects of one's own culture in order to understand other cultures. This draws attention to the influence of socialisation, previous environments and interactions with cultural differences.
2. A 'grounded knowledge base' involves critical analysis of gaps and weaknesses in one's knowledge and content and biases of previous education, and the development of new knowledge (of different cultures, social issues affecting different groups, dynamics of oppression and discrimination, alternative theoretical and practice perspectives, etc.) based on information from diverse communities, institutions and disciplines.
3. 'Cumulative skill proficiency' involves the ongoing development of skills and worldviews, cross-cultural communication, multi-level analysis and intervention, and engagement with culturally diverse clients. This is a focused, systematic and reflective process.

This conceptual framework serves to guide our analysis of the readiness and state of cultural competence amongst social workers in Hong Kong, providing us with the basis of examining social workers' proficiency in different dimensions of cultural competence; how they acquired the knowledge and skills in running services for ethnoculturally diverse clients through social work education and training opportunities, the facilitating factors and barriers, and the essential components of cultural competence training that Hong Kong social workers would want to better serve the culturally diverse clients in a Chinese dominant society.

Methods

Research informants and sampling

Interview informants included frontline registered social workers providing support to ethnoculturally diverse groups in Hong Kong and social work educators teaching in local tertiary institutions. The interviews were conducted by V.W.P.L as well as by Y.-X.R. who has a master's degree in social science. Interview informants were identified and recruited using purposive sampling. Attempts were made to include a balance of very experienced and less experienced practitioners or educators in order to capture a range of experiences and perspectives. The constructivist grounded theory research design facilitated us to investigate, explain and understand the phenomenon and the meanings that individuals create around their experiences, life histories and ways of being (Charmaz, 1995, 2006). This enables this research to move beyond the individuals to understand the meanings that the social workers attached to their experiences and the environment. The constructivist grounded theory had helped to capture the patterns of individual experiences in conceptual categories through informants' voices, whilst also discover other patterns that might not be obvious to the informants (Charmaz, 2000; Mills et al., 2006). The researchers conducting the interviews were conscious about sensitive questions that might challenge the interviewees' personal viewpoints and remained impartial as researchers during data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen Hong Kong social workers, including four educators or from tertiary institutions and nine managerial and frontline registered social workers serving ethnoculturally diverse groups.

All social workers interviewed were ethnic Chinese, they reported having knowledge, views and experiences related to cultural competence and human services in Hong Kong. The length of their work and teaching experiences in social work ranged from five years to twenty-three years, facilitating our understanding of in-depth issues, views and experiences related to cultural competence. However, this study also had a few methodological limitations. First, due to funding limitation, this study was unable to cover a larger sample of key informants. Second, the perspectives of the service users from the culturally diverse groups and the social work students were not included in the analysis as the researchers, without adequate funding, were unable to extend the recruitment to cover these groups.

Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed. Key themes and concepts were identified and quotations were identified and reported in the results as key evidence in support of the themes. Memo-writing and further data collection were conducted to explore and examine emergent insights (Charmaz, 1995, 2006). Themes were continuously reviewed and identified until the point of theoretical saturation. To achieve scientific rigour, internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity were assessed based on principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 1986).

Ethical considerations

The project was approved by the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-committee of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The interviews were audio-recorded with written informed consent obtained from the informants.

Findings

During the in-depth interviews based on the Cultural Competence Attainment Model (McPhatter, 1997), social workers were asked to describe their awareness of and knowledge about cultural competence. This provided insight into facilitators and barriers they faced in learning and practising cultural competence when serving non-Chinese groups.

Consciousness and awareness amongst Hong Kong social workers

Overall, key informants felt that their awareness of the diverse cultural norms of non-Chinese clients was sufficient since there were unique specialised programmes and services available in most Hong Kong social work units. Social workers' higher exposure to non-Chinese clients in recent years was likely the reason for their relatively higher awareness of cultural competence. Social workers working in the Social Welfare Department generally follow social work principles and departmental procedures concerning respect and equality regardless of ethnicity. They treat Chinese and non-Chinese clients equally:

Social workers have to abide by the social work values and ethics in our professional practice. I believe 90% of the workers manage quite well in these. You may see that there are very few complaints from the ethnic minorities on social workers ... I believe in providing services, very few of them would serve with bias, as there is a complaint mechanism.

However, there was no guarantee that this so-called 'equal' treatment implied that workers were sufficiently culturally sensitive and competent. At the same time, the idea of equal treatment for all may actually further reinforce the erroneous perspective of ignoring the cultural uniqueness of clients, which indeed is a form of cultural insensitivity or incompetency (Este, 2007).

In terms of services provided by mainstream social work organisations, key informants noted that most Hong Kong social workers did not have enough cultural knowledge and awareness to serve ethnic minorities. Workers from mainstream organisations usually refer cases to agencies and service units specifically set up for ethnoculturally diverse clients. However, a number of key informants thought that this might not be fully beneficial for non-Chinese clients in terms of social integration as they were always confined to their own social circles. One social worker described the challenges in engaging clients referred by mainstream agencies:

If a mainstream service unit doesn't provide services to South Asian clients, those workers may not be able to respond properly if a minority client visits their centre. In this case, these units would refer the cases to the specialized units for serving the South Asians, like us [a specialised unit]. But it is a bit challenging to ensure a smooth transition in between, because that original service unit might be geographically closer to that minority client, so he or she may still not come to us after receiving our calls.

Another informant reflected that social workers from mainstream organisations might have lower levels of awareness of specific cultural taboos associated with certain ethnicities:

Sometimes the non-Chinese boys are very naughty, so my colleague [a female] who works in a mainstream unit would grab their hands when telling them to behave themselves. Some boys are more sensitive and shook off my colleague's arm ... the colleague seems to be less sensitive to gender differences in their cultures.

These findings suggest that there is a dilemma between offering specialised services to ethnoculturally diverse clients and the facilitation of social integration. On the one hand, those workers are not culturally sensitive enough to taboos, habits and feelings of non-Chinese clients, so in some circumstances, they were reluctant to work with them and they referred them to specialised units. On the other hand, these frequent referrals may affect clients' social integration in Hong Kong as they have few chances to interact with others and access resources offered by mainstream service units. This may be due to the level of readiness and cultural competence amongst social workers and mainstream units in supporting people with different cultural backgrounds.

As all social workers in this study worked in specialised service units for ethnoculturally diverse clients, they made insightful comments on the performance of these agencies and service units. Workers in specialised units with more knowledge and skills in serving non-Chinese clients are more sensitive towards ethnic minorities in general. However, levels of cultural competence vary between individuals and organisations. For example, one frontline worker shared that ‘workers would put clients from different ethnicities to participate together in the activities. But they failed to note that people from different ethnicities do not necessarily share the same values.’

Moreover, under the current system imposed by the government for funding and managing social work agencies, services for ethnoculturally diverse clients are mostly project-based with a lack of stable funding and long-term planning. A key informant indicated:

Most of the agencies nowadays are money-driven. They are very concerned about funding, but they have no ideologies, missions and directions about serving the ethnic minorities. The current norm is, “agencies follow the money”, so there is no long-term plan. Currently, service evaluations are more oriented to figures, but no one bother to take note of the impact of the services on the ethnic minorities.

As more non-Chinese clients are seeking services, social workers are generally able to reorient their worldviews to accept others on the basis of fairness, equality and a sense of shared humanity, as enshrined in McPhatter’s Cultural Competence Attainment Model (McPhatter, 1997). Those workers serving in specialised units for non-Chinese users may be particularly strong in achieving these. However, due to Hong Kong’s unique social service policy framework, services for non-Chinese clients are usually not integrated into mainstream service units. Mainstream staff members need to refer them to the specialised units, but these ad hoc services are usually limited in their financial sustainability. These divisions and disparities in social services could hinder Hong Kong’s progress in achieving ethnocultural integration.

Lacking grounded knowledge base and knowledge acquisition for cultural competence amongst social workers

The interview findings show that social workers in Hong Kong are generally not having sufficient knowledge base and lacking channels for acquiring knowledge for cultural competence. Not every social work trainee has such experiences as the number of service units providing services for non-Chinese people is still limited given Hong Kong’s Chinese-oriented social welfare service framework. Some institutions have developed collaborations with specialised service units for

ethnoculturally diverse clients in order to increase placement opportunities, but they remain a minority. Training on cultural competence skills and attitudes is limited. As a result, social workers may still have a bias against ethnoculturally diverse groups:

Other social workers who heard that we are providing specialized service for ethnoculturally diverse groups were actually shocked that such services actually existed. Some of them would ask if non-Chinese kids were naughtier and more difficult to handle.

There are limited professional development opportunities for social work practitioners. Most culturally focused professional activities tend to involve community visits rather than skill training. Even in specialised service units for ethnoculturally diverse groups, ineffective communication between workers and clients frequently occurs due to a lack of inter-cultural communication skills. Communication gap associated with using interpreters was identified as a concern:

For communications, even though there is an interpreter working with me, some information could be missed out and we still couldn't understand them deeply. Those stories might not be important to the interpreter, but so crucial for our intervention.

Moreover, these specialised service units often cover clients from a range of socio-demographic backgrounds (e.g. age, income and gender) with diverse needs and problems. As a result, social workers may treat all non-Chinese groups in the same way without considering cultural and other differences between them. It remains a challenge for them and their agencies to strike a balance between the learning to serve local Chinese and that to serve non-Chinese clients due to the shortage of resources both in terms of service delivery and staff development.

The attitudes of social workers in Hong Kong are generally aligned with the domain of grounded knowledge in [McPhatter's \(1997\)](#) Cultural Competence Attainment Model. This involves social workers' ability to critically question the knowledge on which their education and training have been based, such as whether the training they receive is too ethnocentric or in lack of components of cultural diversity. Key informants were able to identify the knowledge they required for cultural competence and their own limitations. For example, many social workers serving in specialised service units are generally not well trained in cultural competence. The current social service framework is not sufficiently competent to facilitate the social integration of ethnoculturally diverse groups in society as mainstream units simply refer non-Chinese clients to specialised units. Almost all key informants indicated that cultural competence remained unsatisfactory in the social welfare sector.

Lacking cumulative skills proficiency and skills development in cultural competence

Most social workers saw the need to take part in training activities to better serve clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. In terms of the best practices for culturally competent practice and related training for social workers, some key informants suggested that the local training institutions should provide specialised elective courses about ethnoculturally diverse groups and theories and practice skills related to cultural diversity. Currently, no social work departments in local institutions offer such courses. One social work educator raised suggestions on the improvement in curriculum design:

Social integration should be incorporated into our entire social work curriculum, so that teachers and students could reckon the importance of inclusion. Cultural diversity should be the second thing we need to learn. The third is the nurturance of value in achieving acceptance.

This echoes Lum's (2011) suggestion about the need for further development of social workers' skills in professional practice, such as the ability to perform interventions congruent with clients' cultures. This also echoes the concept of cumulative skill proficiency, which suggests that social workers should learn to engage with clients from different cultural contexts (McPhatter, 1997) as part of initial social work education and training.

Key informants also suggested that employers should be more supportive in enabling staff members to attend training activities during working hours. Professionals would also be encouraged to obtain training if they received accreditations, certificates and other forms of professional recognition upon completion. For example, one key informant recommended that the completion of training should be set as a requirement for the renewal of professional social worker registration. The training content should also be sufficiently applicable and comprehensive to address social workers' challenges in real service settings and specific to Hong Kong's unique cultural circumstances. Inviting experienced instructors might encourage social workers to attend training, as one social worker said: 'If the speaker is more experienced or if we can apply what we learn into our services, we would be more interested to join.'

With respect to barriers to receiving training, social workers were most concerned about their tight working schedules and stressful working environments, which might discourage them from receiving further professional training on cultural competence. Most social workers who do not encounter many non-Chinese clients in their workplaces would be less motivated to receive training in cultural competence as they do not feel the need to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Discussions

Based on the social work cultural competence analytical framework suggested by McPhatter (1997), this study examined the receptivity and readiness for cultural competence training amongst social workers in Hong Kong in the face of increasingly culturally diverse practice environments. It reveals their consciousness and cultural awareness, grounded knowledge base and knowledge acceptance regarding cultural competence, and aspects of cumulative skills proficiency and skills development needs.

In Hong Kong, the code of practice of the Social Workers Registration Board is quite explicit in addressing the importance of cultural awareness and appreciation of differences (Social Workers Registration Board, 2018). However, it is not sufficient in promoting culturally competent practice as it includes only vague provisions stating that social workers should treat and provide services equally to each user regardless of ethnic and cultural background. As social workers who work in specialised units or projects specifically for non-Chinese clients indicated that they have acquired a higher level of cultural competence, exposure to clientele is an important factor affecting social workers' sensitivity and receptivity towards clients' cultural uniqueness. Social workers in Hong Kong, particularly those who work in the specialised units serving the non-Chinese clients, are aware of the need for cultural competence training due to an increasing number of non-Chinese clients. They have claimed to be aware of their cultural values, beliefs and worldviews in serving ethnoculturally diverse groups. This has also proven that cultural competence could be achieved by working more with diverse clients (McPhatter, 1997; Lum, 2011; Danso, 2018).

Key informants also described institutional barriers to the enhancement of cultural competence within the social work sector in Hong Kong. This study reveals that mainstream agencies and units are generally not well prepared to provide services to non-Chinese communities, echoing what Kapai (2014) found about the situation in Hong Kong. Service provision and settings are designed mainly to cater to the needs of local Chinese populations, whilst the non-Chinese clients are often streamed to specialised units for services. This practice does not help promoting the social integration of ethnoculturally diverse clients and may hinder the development of cultural competence knowledge and skills amongst social workers. This problem is similar to what Walter *et al.* (2017) discussed about institutional racism, which is embedded in the bureaucratic structure and institutional environment with biased cultural assumptions of certain groups. It is thus important to promote cultural competence not only in the specialised units but also in mainstream service delivery and amongst individual social workers so as to facilitate a culturally friendly and integrative social service system.

Our key informants demonstrated a strong grounded knowledge base for cultural competence, reflected in their capacity and willingness to critically question the knowledge on which their education and training have been based and their concrete suggestions for improvement (McPhatter, 1997). They recommended an early start of cultural competence training for future practitioners in tertiary institutions, rather than intensive on-the-job training for practicing professionals due to their heavy workload. In terms of on-the-job training, the facilitating factors include professionals' own awareness to acquire cultural competence, subsidies and flexible working hours as compensation for attending training, and incentives such as credits and certificates. Common barriers, on the other hand, include professionals' tight working schedules and stressful working environment. These could hinder social workers' willingness and progress in enhancing skills and knowledge for performing interventions that are congruent with clients' diverse cultural backgrounds, as found by previous research (Lum, 2011; Abramovitz and Blitz, 2015; Walter *et al.*, 2017). The findings also reveal that most leaders of the local social service agencies in Hong Kong lack the awareness of different needs of users from different cultural backgrounds when planning service provision and developing agency culture, as opposed to what Walter *et al.* (2017) discussed. It is crucial for agency leaders and supervisors to openly and explicitly adjust their organisations' intentions and approaches to optimise cultural diversity and avoid the hazards of institutional discrimination.

Recommendations for educational programmes for social workers

In view of the low level of cultural competence amongst Hong Kong social workers in serving ethnoculturally diverse clients, professional training on cultural competence should begin early in tertiary institutions where the future professionals receive training. Social work curricula could adopt an 'infusion model' (Tompkins, 2008) to integrate cultural competence concepts and knowledge, including cultural sensitivity, knowledge of the needs of ethnoculturally diverse clients, practice attitudes, and critical thinking and self-evaluation skills into existing regular training curricula. This approach would allow training content related to diversity to be embedded within every aspect of core and mandatory courses taken by all students who will become social workers. All core courses of social work training programmes, including theory, professional ethics, practical skills and practicums, should include elements to enhance cultural competence.

It is recommended that educators should enrich students' cultural knowledge and awareness and cultivate cultural sensitivity in a comprehensive way. Curriculum and learning activities should focus on

developing students' awareness of their own and clients' worldviews, which are the prerequisites for the provision of effective interventions (Jani et al., 2016). Therefore, educators should not only teach content about ethnoculturally diverse groups and principles such as diversity, social justice and equality. Echoing the suggestions of a number of key informants, students should be provided with more opportunities to interact with people from different ethnocultural groups through seminars, exchange activities, practicums, service-learning, site visits and so on. This training should be both knowledge- and experientially focused with the aim of strengthening students' ability and sensitivity to work with people from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds. As recommended by some key informants, social work curricula might include cultural exchange events jointly organised by students and ethnocultural groups as well as the arrangement of practicums in multicultural service settings.

Within campus settings, there should also be regular seminars and workshops with a focus on cultural issues, attitudes and skills that are essential for professional practice. Senior social workers who are more experienced working in culturally diverse settings could be invited to share with students their practical frontline experiences. Individuals from ethnocultural communities could also be invited to share their feelings and experiences of accessing social services and interacting with social workers. First-hand experiences shared by clients and practitioners themselves could help students to develop a better understanding of diverse clients' feelings and needs as well as practice challenges and strategies. Arat and Kerelian (2019) proposed that factors including cultural diversity training (and more international social workers as trainers and educators), cultural diversity integration on university campuses, integration of social cohesion, incorporation of other disciplines and courses on cultural diversity in social work curricula, and a transformative learning approach (and admission of more ethnic minority and international students in higher education) could help to strengthen the elements of cultural competence in social work education.

Recommendations for eliminating institutional racism

As described in previous sections, there have been major institutional barriers to the enhancement of cultural competence within the social welfare sector in Hong Kong. We thus recommended that social service agencies should facilitate cultural competence so as to achieve the goal of eliminating institutional racism (Blitz and Kohl, 2012). First, changes need to occur at management levels. Leaders should have cultural awareness and promote cultural inclusive practices (Abrams and Moio, 2009). Teams or caucuses identifying institutional racism within the organisations and proposing changes should be established (Blitz and

Kohl, 2012; Foldy and Buckley, 2014; Lusk et al., 2017). Secondly, recruiting staff from diverse cultural backgrounds would increase the capacity of the organisations to better serve clients of diverse needs (Walter et al., 2017). Finally, anti-racism training should be made as an essential professional development component for managers and social work interns (Blitz and Kohl, 2012).

Recommendations for on-the-job training for social workers

Employers should encourage social workers to enrol and participate in programmes during work hours. Flexible work hours or time-release should be granted to professional staff members who receive on-the-job training. Such training not only benefits practitioners themselves but also the service quality of agencies as their practitioners will be more culturally competent in providing services to ethnoculturally diverse groups. Additionally, monetary subsidies and accreditations should be available for practitioners who enrol in training programmes. Formal training programmes and certificates could be used as incentives to motivate a higher level of participation.

Rather than only providing factual information related to the culture of certain ethnoculturally diverse groups, training should place a stronger emphasis on nurturing professionals' self-reflection on performance and responses to culturally diverse environments and considering the feelings and needs of non-Chinese clients. It is also suggested that training of communication skills in interacting with minority clients, more interpretation support services, and even basic training on major ethnic languages should also be offered to solve the communication problems faced by professionals when dealing with clients with diverse cultural backgrounds. Concepts such as justice, equality and avoiding overgeneralisation across ethnicities and faiths should also be covered. Drawing on a participatory action model, the 'Undoing Racism Workshop' offered in New York City could help agency staff members to enhance workers' attitudes and knowledge about race, personal engagement in equity and the organisation's racial equity progress (Abramovitz and Blitz, 2015). Social service agencies in Hong Kong may make reference to this on-the-job training model.

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