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A Multilevel Approach to Cultural Competence: A Study of the Community Response to Underserved Domestic Violence Victims

Loretta Pyles & Kyung Mee Kim

ABSTRACT

Social workers have often considered cultural competence to be an individual ability or skill (Green;, 1999; Ponterotto, Sanchez, & Magids, 1990). Some scholars, however, have transcended this individual-based approach and addressed cultural competence at the interpersonal, agency and systems levels. (Yan & Wong, 2005; Hyde, 2004). In this study, the authors pursued a multilevel approach to studying cultural competence, conceptualized as the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of individuals, agencies, and wider systems to address the needs of underserved and minority populations. Professionals who work with victims of domestic violence were surveyed to assess cultural competence. There were positive relationships between individual cultural competence and both agency and systems cultural competence, indicating that individual, agency, and systems cultural competence are connected and that a multilevel approach to addressing the needs of underserved individuals could prove useful in promoting the ends of social justice.

Domestic violence is a social problem that affects an estimated 2 million women every year in the United States (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Women from diverse backgrounds, including women of color, women with disabilities, and women from both urban and rural settings, experience domestic violence. Multiple barriers exist for women trying to achieve safety in their lives, including lack of system response, mental health issues, substance abuse issues, and fear (Danis & Lockhart, 2003; Tolman & Rosen, 2001). However, for women who are traditionally marginalized by society, some of those barriers are exacerbated. Women of color may experience racism and discrimination from the systems that are designed to support them; women with disabilities may face social service professionals who do not understand their unique needs; and women in rural settings may face isolation or law enforcement that colludes with perpetrators (Davies, 1998; Wolff, Burleigh, Tripp, & Gadomski, 2001).

The social work profession has attempted to mediate the unnecessary problems that diverse individuals face. As the populations with whom professionals worked became more diverse in the 1980s and 1990s, the social work profession began to develop the idea of cultural competence (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989; Weaver, 1999). Cultural competence is closely allied with broader issues of social justice with which the profession is concerned.

The battered women's movement, a group of advocates and workers on the frontline of advocacy and service provision on behalf of victims–survivors of domestic violence, has similarly been concerned about issues of diversity and social justice. Federal funding agencies that provide grants to domestic violence programs have responded to the concern by allocating monies specifically for "underserved populations" and for rural populations.

Much of the social work literature focuses on cultural competence as an individual reality (i.e., a state of a particular individual social worker or helping professional). However, we frame cultural competence as a comprehensive, multilevel phenomenon whereby cultural competence is considered as the knowledge, attitudes, and skills not just of individuals but of agencies and wider systems as well. Social workers and other helping professionals work in agencies with particular climates and policies as well as in diverse communities and statewide systems. These agencies and systems may help or hinder individual competence and vice versa; thus, it is necessary to consider the various levels of cultural competence. This understanding of cultural competence can help researchers and practitioners take into account the entire milieu of professionals, thereby moving toward a notion of cultural competence that is more global and holistic in scope. This panoptic approach to cultural competence is particularly relevant for working with battered women, because they are victims of a gendered social problem and encounter and access a variety of systems and agencies, including criminal justice systems, health care systems, welfare systems, and other social services (Pyles & Postmus, 2004). By gaining insight into the degree of cultural competence of a community at multiple levels, one can understand the strengths of the overall community response to domestic violence as well as the barriers. By understanding the barriers, professionals can pursue remedies such as diversity training and other kinds of systems advocacy as appropriate.

We report on a study conducted in a rural western state, sampling a variety of professionals who work with victims of domestic violence to assess cultural competence on three levels: individual, agency, and systems. After reviewing the literature on cultural competence, we present the methodology of the study followed by results, discussion of the findings, implications for social work, and limitations.

Literature Review

Culturally competent professionals have been described as those who have the ability to serve individuals of diverse backgrounds (Cross et al., 1989). According to Taylor-Brown, Garcia, and Kingson (2001), cultural competence challenges us "to develop and deliver individualized social services within a culturally appropriate context" (p. 185). Cultural competence is often equated with the knowledge, beliefs, and skills that allow professionals to function in cross-cultural settings (Switzer, Scholle, Johnson, & Kelleher, 1998).

Knowledge about various cultural groups is certainly an important component of cultural competence (Weaver, 1999). This includes not only knowledge of the lives of particular ethnic groups but knowledge of oppression more generally. It is essential that one understands how power functions in contemporary society and how institutions maintain power by perpetuating the disenfranchisement of people who are "other" from the dominant system.

Beliefs, values, and attitudes make up another component of cultural competence. Although one's beliefs are likely closely associated with one's knowledge, one's beliefs, attitudes, and values can set a tone in practice settings that can either facilitate or impede healthy and productive interactions. Hardy and Laszloffy (1995) remark that knowledge is primarily a cognitive function, whereas sensitivity or awareness of attitudes is an affective function. They argue that multicultural education tends to overemphasize knowledge content of unique aspects of cultural groups. This emphasis on knowledge does not necessarily translate into a change in attitude, belief, or sensitivity. Awareness of one's own attitudes and beliefs about people who are different is an essential aspect of competent social work practice (Sowers-Hoag & Sandau-Beckler, 1996).

The final component of cultural competence is skills (Weaver, 1997, 1999). These are the actual ways in which knowledge and attitudes are translated into effectiveness in helping situations and may include, for example, culturally competent assessments. It is important to note that practitioners often go through a developmental process whereby knowledge, awareness of one's attitudes, and skills may grow or evolve over time (McPhatter, 1997; Weaver, 1999).

Some researchers have attempted to measure the cultural competence of individual practitioners. Ponterotto et al. (1990) developed the Multicultural Counseling Awareness Scale to measure multicultural knowledge-skills and awareness. Ponterotto and Pederson (1993) developed the Quick Discrimination Index (QDI) to measure sensitivity and receptivity to racial diversity and gender equality (i.e. the respondent's level of awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to racial–ethnic minority issues and women's issues). The QDI consists of three subscales: (a) General Attitudes Toward Racial Diversity, (b) Effective Attitudes Toward More Personal Contact With Racial Diversity, and (c) Attitudes Toward Women's Equality. D'Andrea, Daniels, and Heck (1991) developed the Multicultural Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills Survey to assess the effect of instructional strategies on students' multicultural counseling development.

LaFromboise, Coleman, and Hernandez (1991) introduced the Client Cultural Competence Inventory–Revised to "meet the need for explicit assessment of counseling effectiveness with culturally diverse clients" (p. 381). The Multicultural Counseling Inventory is a measure for evaluating practitioner perceptions of their multicultural competencies (Green et al., 2005).

In addition to understanding and measuring cultural competence as being constituted of knowledge, beliefs, and skills, it also important to consider cultural competence as a phenomenon that goes beyond the individual practitioner (Bailey & Aronoff, 2004). Cornelius, Booker, Arthur, Reeves, and Morgan (2004) note that very few studies of cultural competence approach the issue from the perspective of the consumer. Nybell and Gray (2004) discuss the importance of thinking of cultural competence as a construct not just of the professional but of an organization as well. Similarly, Hyde (2004) introduced Multicultural Organizational Development (MCOD), an agency-based social change process that is rooted in the field of organizational development. Rather than focusing on an individual set of skills, MCOD is viewed as "an organizational-level intervention that would alter the agency's culture" (Hyde, 2004, p. 10). In her qualitative study of agencies implementing this social change strategy, one of the major barriers to such challenging work is what she terms "sociopolitical environment." This barrier includes not only the larger societal political and economic forces but also other systems and agencies with which a particular agency interacts. Although there is a growing recognition of the importance of adding agency cultural competence to an understanding of individual cultural competence, it is our belief that few studies have attempted to actually research cultural competence from a multilevel, ecological perspective (i.e., one that considers cultural competence to include individuals, organizations, and systems). This study seeks to fill this gap by measuring the degree of cultural competence in a rural state.

Method

Research Questions

Four research questions guided this study:

1. Are there any differences in perceptions of individual cultural competence among the three affiliations (i.e., advocates, law enforcement, and other systems)?
2. Are there any differences in perceptions of agency cultural competence among the three affiliations?
3. Are there any differences in perceptions of systems cultural competence among the three affiliations?
4. What are the associations among the three levels of cultural competence: individual cultural competence, agency cultural competence, and systems cultural competence?

Sample

The sample from which the survey data are taken is a convenience sample of professionals who work with battered women in a rural western state with a total population of fewer than 500,000 people (Rubin & Babbie, 1997). A total of 350 surveys were mailed to three main categories of individuals: domestic violence advocates, law enforcement, and other systems. The domestic violence advocate category consisted of staff and volunteers of local domestic violence programs. This group was chosen to be part of the sample because they are the primary individuals who work with battered women, providing emergency and follow-up services. The law enforcement category consisted of employees of police and sheriff's departments across the state. This category was chosen because of the first-response contact they have with victims of domestic violence. Law enforcement was identified by domestic violence advocates at an initial meeting of domestic violence professionals as a critical system that responds to domestic violence. The other systems category included social workers, nurses, educators, victim–witness coordinators, prosecutors, and other social service professionals. These individuals were chosen because of their potential contact with victims. Among the 350 individuals surveyed, 123 people completed surveys, a response rate of 35%. Although this study covers a variety of communities across the state (26), including the three largest cities, several communities chose not to participate and thus are not included sample.

Table 1 describes the characteristics of participants of the study. The sample of 123 individuals included 73 (59%) women and 49 (40%) men. One hundred thirteen (92%) were White. Fifty-eight participants (47%) were between the ages of 38 and 49 years (M = 44 years). A substantial number reside in urban areas (n = 103; 84%), whereas less than 15% (n = 19) reside in rural sections of the state. Forty-six (37.4%) people were affiliated with the advocate group, 50 (40.7%) with law enforcement, and 27 (22%) with other systems.

Data Collection

The survey was developed based on a discussion at a planning meeting of domestic violence program directors and other domestic violence staff across the state. A qualitative study followed this initial meeting, whereby individual interviews and additional focus groups were conducted with former domestic violence service recipients, domestic violence agency staff, and members of community coalitions (Pyles, 2006). These 11 individual interviews and focus groups (N = 75) addressed the strengths and barriers that exist in communities and agencies in their efforts to advocate for diverse and underserved domestic violence victims. The themes revealed in the qualitative study informed the development of the concepts and measures of the survey used for this study.

To identify potential respondents for the quantitative survey, the researchers established relationships with

TABLE 1. *Characteristic of the Participants (N = 123)*

CHARACTERISTIC	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	49	39.8
Female	73	59.3
Missing	1	0.8
Race		
White	113	91.9
Non-White	9	7.3
Missing	1	0.8
Age (years; *M* = 43.9)		
18–36	29	23.6
38–49	58	47.2
50+	36	29.3
Region		
Urban[a]	103	83.7
Rural	19	15.4
Missing	1	0.8
System affiliation		
Advocate	46	37.4
Law enforcement	50	40.7
Other system	27	22.0

[a] A community with a population of 2,500 people or more.

appropriate gatekeepers. Through a statewide law enforcement agency, the researchers were able to access contact information for all sheriff and police departments across the state. To identify potential advocate respondents, the researchers obtained the contact information of directors of local domestic violence programs from the state coalition. These directors were contacted to obtain lists of staff within the agency. The other systems respondents were identified by domestic violence program directors, who sent the researchers contact information of key individuals in the respective communities who encounter domestic violence victims. These key individuals included victim–witness coordinators, prosecutors, social workers, health care professionals, and others, many of whom were members of local domestic violence community-coordinated response teams.

Surveys, informed consent forms, cover letters, and stamped envelopes were mailed to all the potential respondents ($N = 350$). After the data were analyzed and a report was produced, domestic violence program directors from five communities across the state assisted the researchers in assembling community members and other agencies (which included many survey respondents) to listen to a presentation by the researchers and to provide feedback on the findings. Some communities also strategized for the next possible steps to take in their communities, given the research study findings.

Measures

The measures in this study are based on a conceptual framework that uses a multilevel approach to cultural competence, in which the individual practitioner is viewed in a web of relationships to include their own agencies and wider systems. The research operationalized multilevel cultural competence using a combination of three factors: (a) individual cultural competence, (b) agency cultural competence, and (c) systems cultural competence.

The individual cultural competence scales consisted of two measures developed specifically for this study: the Diversity Awareness (DA) Scale and the Diversity Effectiveness (DE) Scale. These scales capture the central aspects of cultural competence that were discussed in the literature review: knowledge, beliefs–values, and skills. The DA Scale measures cultural competence knowledge and beliefs, and the DE Scale measures cultural competence skills.

The DA Scale emerged from themes discovered in the qualitative component that guided this inquiry. This scale measures the degree of knowledge and beliefs that individuals have of the specific needs of diverse individuals. Diversity is defined as being of a minority race–ethnicity, non-English speaking, sexual orientation, ability (such as mental health), and age. The instrument consists of 10 items and uses a 5-point Likert scale, with answers ranging from *not aware at all* to *very aware.* Scores can range from 10 to 50; high scores indicate more knowledge of the needs of underserved survivors. Cronbach's alpha of the DA Scale was .85.

The DE Scale also emerged from themes discovered in the qualitative component of this study. It measures the self-reported degree of effectiveness in working with marginalized individuals (e.g., women with mental health issues, women who identify as Native American, women with substance abuse problems). It is intended to measure the self-perceived effectiveness of the practitioner. The DE Scale includes 12 items and has a Cronbach's alpha of .90. Questions require respondents to assess diversity effectiveness on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *not effective at all* to *very effective.* Scores range from 12 to 60.

Agency cultural competence is conceptualized as the degree of cultural competence of an agency. This is operationalized as two factors. First, respondents are asked whether their agency offers training or has policies about diversity issues. This is a single-item, dichotomous question. Second, a single-item question asks respondents to assess agency diversity awareness on a 5-point Likert scale. Answers range from *not aware at all* to *very aware.*

Systems cultural competence is indicated by a score on an original 14-item scale that asks respondents to assess how effective various community systems are in working with diverse and underserved populations. The measure uses a 5-point Likert scale and included queries about such community systems as police, courts, hospital, churches, and child protection systems.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for the demographic characteristics. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine group differences of individual cultural competence practices (Keppel, 1991; Weinbach & Grinnell, 1998). To investigate the relationships among two individual cultural competence measurements, we used correlation analysis with the Pearson product–moment correlation coefficient. For agency cultural competence, a cross-table with chi-square was used. ANOVA was used to determine differences in systems cultural competence among the three affiliations.

TABLE 2. *Mean Comparison of Diversity Awareness*

VARIABLE	ADVOCATES	LAW ENFORCEMENT	OTHER SYSTEMS	TOTAL
Aware that women with disabilities may not report violence	4.76	4.31	4.59	4.54**
Aware that practices such as child rearing vary in cultures	4.51	4.35	4.41	4.42
Aware of systems' contributions to social problems	4.44	4.04	4.52	4.30**
Aware of additional barriers faced by older battered women	4.47	3.96	4.12	4.19*
Aware of the needs of women with disabilities	4.27	4.08	4.19	4.17
Aware of how own race, age, class influence effectiveness	3.96	3.83	4.52	4.03*
Aware that some view social service as inappropriate	3.91	3.80	4.31	3.95
Aware of attitudes about Latino/Hispanic individuals	4.00	3.85	3.88	3.92
Total score	4.10	3.51	4.08	3.85**
Aware of attitudes about Native Americans	4.10	3.60	3.75	3.84
Aware of attitudes about lesbians	4.03	3.54	3.80	3.78

*p < .05. **p < .005.

Results

Individual Cultural Competence

Individual cultural competence was measured by using the DA and the DE Scales. The total scores of the DA Scale (Table 2) were 4.10 for the advocate group, 4.08 for other systems, and 3.51 for law enforcement. Among the three affiliations, advocates were the most aware of the specific needs of traditionally marginalized individuals. Law enforcement was the least aware. The result was statistically significant ($p < .005$). In three items, "aware that my own race, sexual orientation, age, or class background may influence my effectiveness," "aware of how economic and cultural systems contribute to their problems," and "aware that some view social service as appropriate," the other systems had the highest mean score. The law enforcement group had the lowest score in all 10 items among the three affiliations.

The differences across the three affiliations regarding the DE Scale were not statistically significant. The total DE Scale scores were 3.15 for the advocacy group, 3.12 for law enforcement, and 3.10 for other systems. Among the three groups, the advocacy group had the highest score, but the gap among the three groups was very slight.

To investigate correlations within the individual cultural competence construct, the total mean scores of the DA Scale and the DE Scale were used. The total mean scores of the DA and DE Scales were made of the sum of each item's score divided by the number of items of each scale. The correlation of the DE and DA Scales was .23, and the direction of the relationship was positive with statistical significance ($p < .05$). The correlation of the DE and DA Scales as components of the individual competence developed from the study reveals that this measurement is reliable.

The DA Scale results reveal that law enforcement was the least sensitive. Namely, among three affiliations, law enforcement might be the least culturally competent based on their scores. In contrast, advocates and other systems reported the highest levels of cultural competence. The fact that law enforcement identified as the least culturally competent is not surprising in light of findings from other studies of domestic violence victims who report having been discriminated against by law enforcement officers (Danis & Lockhart, 2003; Davies, 1998; Schechter, 1982; Wolff et al., 2001).

Agency Cultural Competence

Table 3 shows the differences across three affiliations in terms of agency cultural competence. Among the domestic violence advocacy group, 94% reported having had agency training or agency policies that specifically address diversity issues. However, only 78% of other systems and 67% of the law enforcement group had diversity training or policies. Among the three groups, the advocate group had the most diversity training or policies from their affiliated agencies. Differences in diversity training among the three groups are statistically significant.

As another agency cultural competence measure, respondents were asked to assess agency awareness. Thirty-seven percent of the advocate group responded "very aware" compared with 26% of people from other systems and 10% of people in law enforcement. Twenty-eight percent of those in law enforcement responded "somewhat aware" compared with 11% of advocates and 15% of people from other systems.

The correlation between agency cultural competence and individual cultural competence was .263 ($p < .01$). The relation was positive and the degree of the relationship was mild. The variable of agency cultural competence consisted of two factors: provision of agency training and agency awareness. Individual cultural

TABLE 3. *Comparison of Diversity Training and Awareness Across Agencies*

	Advocacy		Law enforcement		Other systems	
Variable	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Agency training*						
Yes	43	93.5	33	67.3	21	77.8
No	3	6.5	16	32.7	6	22.2
Total	46	100	49	100	27	100
Agency awareness						
Not aware at all	0	0	1	2.0	0	0
Mild aware	1	2.2	4	8.0	3	11.1
Somewhat aware	5	10.8	14	28.0	4	14.8
Aware	23	50.0	26	52.0	13	48.2
Very aware	17	37.0	5	10.0	7	25.9
Total	46	100	50	100	27	100

*p < .01, chi-square test.

competence consisted of a sum of each item of the DA and the DE Scales. This finding reveals that individual competence is related to agency competence.

Systems Cultural Competence

Systems cultural competence assesses the effectiveness of various systems in working with diverse and underserved populations. Law enforcement assesses police department, sheriff's department, child and family services (child protection, economic assistance), child support enforcement, legal services, district court, hospital, and churches as the most effective systems. On the contrary, advocates evaluate alcohol–drug programs and domestic violence programs as the most effective systems. Other systems assess mental health–counseling and batterer's programs as effective. One's professional affiliation seems to guide one's response to questions concerning the effectiveness of agencies. Respondents tend to assess their own type of agency as using the best practices (Table 4).

The Associations Between the Three Levels of Cultural Competence

The correlation coefficient between individual cultural competence and agency cultural competence was .263 ($p < .01$). This means that individual cultural competence was positively correlated with agency cultural competence. The correlation between individual competence and system competence was .243 ($p < .01$), which indicates the presence of a statistically significant, positive correlation between the two variables. The association between agency competence and system competence was also positive but with no statistical significance ($r = .109$).

Discussion

The fact that there is a positive and significant relationship between individual cultural competence and both agency and systems cultural competence is an important finding of this study. This indicates that individual cultural competence is not an island unto itself; instead, one's level of cultural competence is associated with one's context (i.e., one's agency and one's community). It is not necessarily the case that individual cultural competence causes agency or systems cultural competence or vice versa. Indeed, this would be a difficult phenomenon to attempt to understand empirically. However, as many social workers are aware, the person-in-environment and ecological perspectives are certainly operating when it comes to social work practice (Germain, 1991). The ecology of the individual, agency, and community are influencing each other at some level. Although it is beyond the scope of this research to understand exactly in what ways these ecologies influence one another, the associations are certainly important to keep in mind. Furthermore, it seems that one will have greater success addressing domestic violence and other social problems in a culturally competent way if one works in an agency that is culturally competent and in a community with systems that are culturally competent. In addition, an individual with a high level of cultural competence could positively impact an agency or system with low cultural competence.

Generally, the findings indicate that battered women's advocates have the highest levels of individual cultural competence. This is not a surprising finding given that battered women's advocates are trained to work with a marginalized group of people, namely battered women. Additionally, in the history of the battered women's movement, training and practice have focused on linking violence against women to other oppressions such as racism and homophobia (Pyles & Postmus, 2004; Schechter, 1982). It makes sense, therefore, that battered women's advocates would score high in terms of cultural competence. Although the other systems category consists of some social workers, other professionals in the category include educators, victim–witness coordinators, and nurses, who may not have formal training in diversity issues.

The fact that law enforcement scored lowest on individual cultural competence is also not surprising given that studies show that women of color have not historically

TABLE 4. *Mean Comparison of System Effectiveness*

Variable	Advocates	Law enforcement	Other systems	Total
Police department	2.86	3.98	3.38	3.44**
Sheriff's department	3.05	3.83	3.30	3.42**
Domestic violence program	4.09	3.83	3.96	3.96
Batterer's program	3.54	3.18	3.67	3.47
Hospital	3.41	3.43	3.32	3.40
Circuit court	3.03	3.53	3.57	3.35
District court	3.05	3.45	3.24	3.26
Alcohol–drug program	3.35	3.06	2.87	3.12
Department of Family Services				
Child protection	2.36	3.67	3.32	3.09**
Economic assistance	2.56	3.45	3.18	3.00**
Churches	2.89	3.19	2.90	2.99
Mental health–counseling	2.55	3.19	3.38	2.97*
Child support enforcement	2.58	3.15	3.05	2.90
Legal services	2.60	3.16	2.89	2.87

*p < .05. **p < .005.

considered law enforcement to be a resource because of previous experiences of racism with them (Davies, 1998). Recall that although law enforcement scored lower on the DA Scale than the other groups, they considered themselves just as effective as the other groups (there was no difference between groups on the DE Scale). This may imply that individuals in law enforcement tend to be very practical and do not perceive their effectiveness to be related to the more philosophical aspects of cultural competence such as awareness (knowledge and beliefs).

Implications for Social Work

The findings of this study have implications for social work research, practice, and education. First, in the research venue, it is necessary to continue to develop and refine measures that assess cultural competence at multiple levels, including the cultural competence of individuals, agencies, and systems. It is our hope that future research includes further testing of the instruments developed for this study: the DA and the DE Scales. Researchers attempting to measure cultural competence also might want to consider assessing both the agency and the systems within which the practitioner is working. Assessing the cultural competence of individual practitioners alone masks a larger picture that is critical for social service provision and advocacy for clients.

Second, in the practice venue, it is important for social workers and other social service professionals to incorporate community organizing and community practice strategies (macropractice orientations). These strategies would focus on making policy and program changes that are conducive to diversity issues in multiple systems. Practice should involve working toward social justice not just in the one-on-one setting but in the context of the organization as well as wider community systems (Hyde, 2004). Specht and Courtney (1994) keenly noted that social workers have ignored this important aspect of social work practice. Pyles and Postmus (2004), in their review of the domestic violence literature, noted the lack of writing about domestic violence from a social change perspective, calling for more emphasis on the social and systemic barriers that exist for battered women. The findings in this study, coupled with such previous writings, remind us of the importance of systems change and agency-level advocacy from a social justice perspective.

Additionally, the findings of this study imply that law enforcement agencies may particularly be in need of in-depth training on diversity and multicultural issues. Social workers who regularly address issues or work in venues that are relevant to the criminal justice system (child abuse, domestic violence, corrections) could take a leadership role in the provision of training and other systems advocacy with law enforcement. An efficacious strategy may involve handpicking law enforcement officers who are open to becoming a trainer of trainers and then conducting diversity trainings from a team perspective. Law enforcement officers may be more open to the challenging issues addressed in diversity training when it is conducted by another law enforcement officer.

Third, in the education venue, social work educators might consider teaching administrative and community-track students about the importance of cultural competence at the agency and community levels. Incorporating information and activities in graduate-level courses that focus on such methods as MCOD (Hyde, 2004) could provide future administrators and community players with tools to promote social justice and cultural competence.

Limitations

The measures used in this study pose some limitations. Individual cultural competence is measured by two original scales. By contrast, agency cultural competence is measured only by two single-item questions, and systems cultural competence is measured by an original scale. This discrepancy can be considered problematic and is a limitation when comparing the three types of cultural competence.

In addition, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution. First, because we used a convenience sampling procedure and there was no randomized sample, it is not possible to generalize these findings to a larger population. Second, because the sample included only 123 individuals, it is not possible to claim that we measured cultural competence of the entire state. A larger sample representing the populations of various parts of the state would be necessary. Third, the population of this state is primarily White; thus, the voices of people of color are not adequately represented. Financial limitations as well as the needs of the agency that hired the researchers restricted our ability to use purposive sampling techniques. It should be noted, however, that the qualitative study included interviews and focus groups with a variety of people of color, particularly Latina women (the major minority group in the state), as well as women with disabilities and women who identified as gay or lesbian. Recall that these focus groups guided the development of the measures. Follow-up studies should include the voices of people of color, particularly Latinos and Native Americans, because these two groups are the primary minority groups living in the state being studied. Fourth, all of the measures and findings concern the perceptions of individuals. This is limiting because, for example, the construct systems cultural competence is not an objective, observed phenomenon but rather is based on the opinion of the respondent. Finally, these findings do not tell us whether cultural competence results in good outcomes for the individuals on whose behalf the professionals are working. Future studies should connect degrees of cultural competence to outcomes such as levels of victim-survivor safety.

Conclusion

To address the need for an assessment of cultural competence of domestic violence, law enforcement, and other service providers in a rural western state, we incorporated a multilevel assessment of cultural competence. We surveyed 123 professionals about their perceptions of their own individual cultural competence, the cultural competence of their agencies, and the cultural competence of other systems in their communities. Significant differences existed between types of professionals and their perceptions of cultural competence. The various levels of cultural competence were found to be correlated with each other. These findings indicate a need for targeted diversity training and systems advocacy in particular venues, especially law enforcement. In addition, because the results show a relationship between the cultural competence of an individual and his or her agency and community, a community-wide approach to addressing the needs of underserved individuals could prove useful in promoting the ends of social justice.

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