

‘Diversity Culture’ in Social Services: Person-Centered Care

Rina Manuela Contini

University of L’Aquila, L’Aquila, Italy

This article addresses the issue of ‘diversity culture’ in social services with the purpose of re-conceptualizing person-centered social services theory and practice. The increased participation of women, minorities, and people of different nationalities and cultures in the business world is outlining a transformation of the workforce. In parallel, there is also a diversification and heterogeneity of customers, social service users’ needs, and markets and consumers’ styles. The paper analyzes main groups of theories that inform social services techniques—psychological theories, cognitive behavioral theories, systemic theories, humanistic theories, and constructionist theories—with the aim of re-thinking models and practices to address the challenges that the social services are facing in responding to needs of cultural, gender, action potential, and age diversity. Specifically, social workers and the social services system are required to adapt to the changing circumstances of the social, economic, cultural and communicative environment.

Keywords: diversity culture, social services, person-centered care, diversity management

Introduction

In a context of strong social, cultural, economic, and political transformation, linked to the transformative power of new communication technologies, global dynamics, international migration, and the internationalization of markets, the issue of the integration of cultural, action potential, gender, and age diversity within social services becomes central. The communicative interactions between culturally diverse people, the intertwining of different cultural, religious, and linguistic dimensions, which are reflected in the processes of composition and re-composition of belongings and identities, are posing public, private and nonprofit companies and organizations in front of the need for human resource management, for empowering the specificities of individual people, for the ability to respond to various types of populations and multiple users.

Social services are facing the challenge of addressing the needs of this increasingly diverse population.

Diversity Management

The literature on ‘diversity management’ began to emerge in Europe at the beginning of 1990s both in response to the need to take measures to combat cultural and racial discrimination and because of the European Union’s orientation to work towards overcoming discrimination in access to the labor market, in the workplace, as well as to promote gender equity and equal opportunity (De Vita, 2013).

Rina Manuela Contini, Ph.D. in Social Sciences, Adjunct Professor of Social Services Methodology and Techniques, Department of Human Sciences, University of L’Aquila, L’Aquila, Italy.

The European Commission (2007) defined Diversity Management as the 'active and conscious development of a forward-looking managerial process' of accepting and valuing diversity as an organization's potential with a view to creating added value for the business and enhancing human capital. Diversity-oriented workforce management responds to the need to introduce elements of innovation in business processes, products, and services in pursuit of competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Diversity management emerges in the American context in the garb of the journey that began in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement that brought the issue of valuing differences into the American debate. In the 1980s, the strengthening of the dimension of heterogeneity in the labor market prompts many organizations to experiment with actions to enhance employee diversity.

Research highlights the economic benefits of using a diverse workforce, such as the driving for innovation and change, quality of relationships and work environment, increased productivity along with commitment to social justice issues.

Beginning in 2004, fourteen European countries—France, Germany, Spain, Austria, Sweden, Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Denmark, Ireland, Finland, Estonia, and the Czech Republic—have produced *Diversity Charters* for Equal Opportunities and Equality at Work, with the aim of giving businesses and companies guidance for implementing policies to enhance diversity in organizations and workplaces.

The principles at the core of the Charters are managing diversity, recognizing equal treatment, and respecting differences. 'Investing in diversity' in work organization meets the goal of promoting innovation in efficiency, strengthening awareness of respect of differences, and practical benefits on the whole society.

Spreading the culture of diversity results in innovative human resource management within organizations and companies based on the valuing of differences (Monks, 2007). Diversity management is a strategy aimed at translating heterogeneity, as a characteristic of people, into potential that implies a new culture of organization and communication oriented to the empowerment of individual specificities.

Social Services Theories and Techniques for Diversity Recognition

A key conceptual innovation in the framing of social service policies and practices is the concept 'diversity'. Antonsich and Matejskova (2015) stated that the central question in today's complex and globalized societies is 'how-to live-in diversity'. The concept 'diversity' illustrates the benefits of possessing diversified skills and linguistic and cultural plurality in private businesses and public services (Ambrosini, 2014).

The dissemination of the culture of diversity translates into innovative human resource management within organizations and companies based on valuing differences. The culture of diversity is also shaped in relation to understanding and valuing the differences of the various types of users and the multiplicity of service users and social services. The non-homogenization of organizational processes and services provided results in a consolidation of the culture of welcoming the different instances coming from different subjects (Fazzi, 2017).

The complex nature of social service work, which refers to people with different life paths, requires adopting a plurality of theoretical assumptions (Fazzi, 2017). Theories offer the possibility of setting and interrogating work practices. Edith Abbot's definition of social work as a 'profession of boundaries' hints at the sense of change implicit in the profession of social work and the ability to interrogate reality based on models that provide ever new working hypotheses.

Positive Interpersonal Helping Relationship

In the complex work of social services, psychoanalytic theories turn their attention to the dimension of the inner workings of human beings (Freud), but also to the relational and interpersonal dimension or, more recently, to such elements as religious, ethnic, geographic origin, factors related to social class, gender, age (Erikson, 1959). Psychoanalytic techniques are used in the field of minors at risk, maltreatment trauma, drug addiction or violence. The application of psychoanalytic theories to the assessment process is reflected in the attention to the inner, unexpressed experience of individuals, to help people become aware of the deep nature of behaviors (Fazzi, 2017). For the effectiveness of social service work, it is important to structure a positive interpersonal helping relationship between operator and user that is based on listening, nonjudgmental attitude, and empathy. Communication capable of going beyond the surface requires a practitioner who can refrain from showing bias and overcome, through the method of free association, the interlocutor's resistance.

One of the strengths of this approach is the quality of the helping relationship. The relationship between practitioner and user is delineated as collaborative and bidirectional through a therapeutic alliance based on a sharing of objectives and recognition of the equal dignity of both subjects (Fazzi, 2017). From this perspective, human behavior is analyzed in its complexity, moved not only by the rational dimension but also by instincts and feelings. The collaborative and symmetrical nature of the helping relationship, based on mutual respect and active involvement in listening, is a basic dimension for change.

The Demands of Measuring Social Services Outcomes

In the current period of managerial reorganization of social services, methods and practices informed by cognitive behavioral theories meet the demands of optimizing the time-objective ratio (Fazzi, 2017). In this frame, the application of cognitive behavioral theories results in the acquisition of behavioral and cognitive skills and abilities that can modify behaviors that result in situations of disadvantage or social exclusion.

This approach assumes that the unit of analysis is visible behavior, and that learning is the outcome of the causal association between stimulus and response, in the view of 'operant conditioning' (Skinner). The strength of techniques and practices inspired by cognitive behavioral theories is the concreteness of interventions and the measurement of goals. These features are in line with the demands of measuring social services outcomes and the requirements of maximizing time against goals, in line with welfare management policies (Fazzi, 2017).

The main behavior remodeling techniques are cognitive restructuring, modeling (Bandura, 1977), self-efficacy, problem solving skill development, and motivational interviewing. The main criticism of the working model informed by cognitive behavioral theories can be caught in the underestimation of the unseen factors that shape human behavior.

In addition, since the 1980s, the managerial direction given to social services and the demand for reducing costs push towards the organization of work in the public sector according to the model and efficiency techniques that refer to neo-positivism (Fazzi, 2017). Positivist theories have their roots in Comte's positivism and are based on the idea that reality is objectively knowable using the scientific method, which is aimed at understanding laws of nature and society.

Empirical evidence, which is placed at the basis of social services practices, results in the setting of guidelines, positivist-oriented best practices that are aimed at reducing the risks of practitioners' subjectivism. The 'scientific practitioner', in evaluating the helping relationship, is directed towards gathering information

that is convertible into measurable data; building working hypotheses and guidelines for action; implementing evidence-informed practices; monitoring critical reflection and systematic evaluation of work (Fazzi, 2017). From this perspective, the use of empirical research data can provide guidelines for risk factor assessment and risk management. Empirical evidence and indicators based on standard criteria are a tool for guiding the work of social workers and for designing interventions aimed at pursuing specific goals. In contrast, practices informed by positivist theories, if not complemented by other critical approaches, can result in cognitive reductionism that pays little attention to the complex correlation between symbolic, cultural, and social systems and the meaning individuals attribute to their own behavior (Fazzi, 2017).

Social Services as an Agent of Social Change

New social phenomena related to international migration and diversity as a feature of today's societies (Antonsich & Matejskova, 2015) result in increasing attention to the question of spirituality as an element in understanding the behavior and value world of many people and social groups.

In addition, the interconnectedness and cultural diversity of societies shift the focus of social service research to the cultural and social processes that drive certain conditions of human existence as a condition of social marginalization. In this context, the need to recover the dimension of social services as an agent of social transformation (Adams, 2001) and change in the conditions that constitute exclusion and disadvantage becomes crucial.

Systemic theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Rapoport, 1968; Luhmann, 1995) conceptualizes the individual as part of a system and pays attention to the relationships between individuals and the environment. At both conceptual and operational levels, there is a paradigm shift that links individuals' behavior and thinking to the interrelationship of internal as well as external or environmental factors. Communication, conflicts, tensions, change, and integration are properties of the system before they are properties of the members. In such a conceptual framework, the family constitutes a system kept alive by interactions among members. Boundaries constitute both protective barriers and points of contact with the outside environment. Distress should be analyzed as the result of systemic interactions and processes.

Working with an increasingly diverse population and families is a complex challenge for social work that requires social workers to have skills in managing and understanding diversity. Areas of intervention include mediation and conflict management, negotiation, facilitation, problem solving, coaching, relational support, and counseling. In the case of immigrant families, the evaluation process also includes the external environment and cultural barriers, stereotypes, and prejudices (Fazzi, 2017).

The levels of analysis are directed towards the micro-meso-macro-systems including socio-economic and employment institutions, values, and normative references. Assessment focuses on the interactions between individuals and systems which structure a landscape ecology, such as culture, economy, and social organization.

The methods involve the integration of interventions with the goal of reorganizing services and creating responses in the community dimension. The practitioner works on boundary areas (Fazzi, 2017) by managing interconnections and integrating disconnected or weakly connected systems.

Social services work shifts from the dimension of the individual to factors interrelated with the individual level. In this way, the practitioner is led to overcome 'linear thinking' and develop complex thinking that includes analysis of the interaction between multiple dimensions and variables that influence life trajectories

and human behaviors (Fazzi, 2017). The analysis of human behavior includes not only the psychological dimension but also fields such as anthropology, economics, politics, and sociology.

Cultural Diversity in Social Services

A key complexification factor of diversity in societies is given by migration patterns. Cultural diversity, linked to the migration experience, is often intertwined with forms of inequality, risk of poverty, social exclusion, and power asymmetry and oppression.

Social work practitioners play a filtering role in social work with immigrants and are a gateway into host country institutions (Barberis & Boccagni, 2016). Immigrants compared to other categories of beneficiaries of social welfare policies tend to be objectively weak but subjectively strong (Ambrosini, 2011). Subjectively, they are equipped with skills and resources to mobilize. Structurally vulnerable foreigners' status and weak primary networks translate into higher risks of job losses, economic, relational, and housing poverty, and increased likelihood of welfare dependency. The social demand of foreigners constitutes a challenge for social services. The transformations of social service users, who express a complex and multidimensional demand for help, also raise the question of social workers' initial training and professional development.

In such a picture, cultural diversity poses new challenges and issues for social welfare. Firstly, social work is organized by the social mainstream, which defines from top-down the needs to which social services are supposed to respond, without the bottom-up voice of users emerging or users participating in defining their own needs. Secondly, inequalities related to cultural diversity raise the question of declining the principles of social justice, human rights, and respect for diversity in professional practice, especially in a context of lack of resources to manage diversity. In fact, institutional mandates, available resources and the demands of policymakers on social services push towards standardization of interventions rather than individualization.

A gap can be noticed between statements and practices in social services. At the theoretical level, the diversity of social service users is seen as an opportunity for individualization of interventions and recognition of user subjectivity. In practice, the standardization of interventions unreflectively pushes ethno-cultural stereotypes, helping to reinforce or reproduce them. Social workers tend to resort to culturalist simplifications to reduce cultural complexity (Ferrari, 2010; Barberis & Boccagni, 2016).

Social Services Informed by Cultural Competence

Increasingly cultural complexity and diversity is a challenge for social work, as it requires skills and tools not currently always present in the baggage of social workers. In addition, the cultural diversity outlines the issue of declining the principles of social justice and respect for diversity in effective daily professional practice.

The idea that individuals' behaviors and ways of thinking have to be understood through the system of social and cultural meanings is typical of constructionist theories. The matrix of cognitivist and social constructionism is Husserl's phenomenology.

The introduction of constructionism in social services began in the 1990s as a response to the managerial reorganization of social services (Fazzi, 2017). It also denotes a growing attention to the issue of cultural and ethnic differences of users. Cultural attention leads to more effective assessment and intervention techniques in a social context characterized by cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. The ability of practitioners to work in such social contexts is defined as 'cultural competence'. Cultural competence is the way in which

practitioners try to respond respectfully and effectively to the needs of diverse individuals and place the helping relationship within the complex system of symbolic meanings.

Language is used to unveil the labeling behind narratives and to produce alternative narratives that drive individuals to change.

Socio-constructionist theories conceptualize knowledge as the outcome of socially constructed processes produced through culture, language, communication and social interaction (Parton, 2002). According with socio-constructionism, reality exists not as a set of objective data, but as systems of conventions that are defined through a dialectical relationship between the observer and the observed. The introduction of socio-constructionism in social work is outlined as a response to both the growing pressures of managerialism and standardization of social work (Fazzi, 2017) and cultural, religious and ethnic complexity. Informing social work to intercultural competence provides a tool for social workers to use when interacting with individuals from different social groups, cultures and traditions. At the same time, being culturally competent enables practitioners to act not as executors but as agents of change.

The constructionism approach enables social workers to effectively deal with social complexity (Fazzi, 2017). In this view, the social service profession is marked by reflexivity and autonomy, enhancing its vocation for promoting change and encouraging the implementation of active forms of collaboration among citizens, users, and practitioners towards respect for and appreciation of diversity.

Nevertheless, approaches related to cultural competence have been criticized from both a technical and a theoretical perspective. Technically, it is difficult to outline appropriate training for social workers related to specific cultural content without risking reducing the complexity and plurality of the users. Theoretically, models of cultural competence would tend to have a culturalist approach that hypostatizes cultural affiliations and underestimates the power asymmetries inherent in the use of institutionalized identity labels (Barberis & Boccagni, 2016; Boccagni, 2015; Abrams & Moio, 2009). Thus, the risk is that the cultural competence approach fosters a simplistic view of cultural diversity, reinforcing stereotypes and promoting oppressive practices (van der Haar, 2009; Eliassi, 2013).

In addition, Milton J. Bennett's (2015, in Barberis & Boccagni, 2016) studies on intercultural communication—while sharing with the cultural competence approach the underestimation of power issues (Pica-Smith, Contini, & Veloria, 2019)—have pointed out that acceptance and knowledge of diversity are not sufficient elements for the development of an accomplished cultural sensitivity (Barberis & Boccagni, 2016).

The Intercultural Approach and Neo-liberal Policies

The intercultural approach in Europe is promoted by official documents as a new form of diversity governance based on the recognition of the equal dignity of cultures and intercultural exchange and interaction (Council of Europe, 2008; 2014). The document *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (Council of Europe, 2008) is designed to provide a framework to guide institutions, local communities, and civil society towards the democratic 'governance' of cultural diversity and social cohesion. The intercultural approach is based on a dynamic and processual conception of culture that rejects the essentialist conception of culture as ethno-centric boxes (Zapata-Barrero, 2015; Contini, 2017a; Pica-Smith et al., 2019; Colòn, Veloria, Pica-Smith, & Contini, 2022). Intercultural policies focus on promoting exchange and interaction between people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, aiming at community building.

In accordance with the theorization of the intercultural model, the intercultural competence consists of the combination of knowledge, attitudes and skills that enable one to respond positively in situations involving understanding people with different cultural affiliations. Intercultural competence is the ability of the individual to create constructive relationships based on respect, appreciation, and valuing others (Barrett, 2012; Pica-Smith, Veloria, & Contini, 2020).

Analyzing the socio-political and historical context in which the advocacy of interculturalism as a model for managing 'diversity' is framed (Contini, 2017a; Pica-Smith et al., 2019), it can be observed that the promotion of the intercultural approach to the diversity governance in Europe is combined with the implementation of 'managed immigration' and 'civic integration' policies focused on demanding 'civic requirements' (Goodman, 2010) and the promotion of 'civic integration' courses for language proficiency, conformity to dominant values and norms (Antonsich, 2016; Entzinger, 2003), tests for new immigrants, and citizenship ceremonies (Joppke, 2007; 2016). Civic integration policies fit into the idea of 'governmentality' (Dean, 1999; Ambrosini, 2016) and the neo-liberal policy orientation (Contini, 2017b), which shifts the focus from 'rights' to 'duties' (King, 1999) and is defined as Foucauldian liberalism of 'power and disciplining'.

The intercultural approach, civic integration policies, governmentality, and neo-liberalism are linked by the need for state competitiveness in a context of globalization, which requires the 'autonomy' and 'self-reliance' of individuals and a new sense of integration conceived as 'social inclusion' and 'social cohesion', 'social order' and not 'social justice' (Contini, 2017a; Pica-Smith et al., 2019: Chapter 1). In this perspective, as Orgad (2015) stated, integration is understood as the willingness to respect laws, ways of life and culture of the host and the majority of society. Civic integration is conceptualized as a new policy that distances itself from multiculturalism, which is accused of fostering 'diaspora' (Collier, 2013) and social disintegration, the weakening of collective identities and national identity. The focus of interculturalism as well as neo-liberalism is the micro level, meaning the 'individual' as the subject of integration. In contrast, the key concept of multicultural policies is the macro level of group and diversity recognition at the public policy level (Modood, 2007; 2019; Kymlicka, 2016; Modood, Contini, & Pica-Smith, 2020). In this view, one of the critical issues of the intercultural approach is the focus on the 'individual' as the subject of integration not balanced by a focus on the issues of power imbalances between majority and minority groups and social transformation to de-construct structural systems of oppression for more social justice (Pica-Smith et al., 2019; Gorski, 2013).

Conclusions

The debate on social services quality should be framed within the need to adapt social work to increasing social, cultural, and communicative complexity. Global dynamics are producing a widening of interactions and communications among culturally diverse people, which reflects on the processes of shaping composite and fluid identities (C. W. Stephan & W. G. Stephan, 2000; Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Contini, 2012; 2017a; Bussu & Contini, 2021). The interconnection and interdependence of communications, cultures, languages, and relationships affect people's cognitive and emotional development.

The issue of cultural, action potential, gender, and age diversity is a central element of an effective social services practice. Diversity culture enables practitioners to work effectively in a multicultural context to be respectful of users' experiences, and to improve intervention capacity (Steinberg & Down, 2020). The construction of the profession in social services, which addresses increasingly diverse and complex people, involves a process of mutual co-production between theory and practice. Theoretical references are a tool for

shaping practice and interrogating professional practice, opening the exploration of a plurality of social interventions that is nourished by an open and non-simplifying mind.

The culture of diversity provides the tools for interacting with individuals belonging to different social groups, cultures, and traditions, as well as enhances the autonomy of the social profession and its vocation for promoting change (Fazzi, 2017; Bussu & Contini, 2021), and incentivizes new forms of active collaboration among citizens, users, and practitioners.

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