

## Values and cultural issues in social work

Professor Brian Littlechild, University of Hertfordshire, England

### Abstract

This article examines issues of culture in English social work, with particular reference to current policy and practice in the treatment of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), migrant and minority faith groups in England within the child protection and Youth Justice Systems. Several themes are explored:

- cultural differences and the effects of policies and attitudes towards such differences
- the types and scale of discrimination due to such differences
- the role played by professional decision makers and
- the overall impact lack of appreciation of cultural issues has on policies and practices.

It moves on to consider our understanding of the role that ethnicity cultural factors and the theory of 'Otherness' play in the structures and outcomes of child protection and youth justice systems, and subsequent issues arising for professionals within their work roles. The article sets out how social workers have an ethical duty to understand these issues, and how to work positively with such difference in order to avoid unfair discrimination against such culturally different groups.

### Article

This article argues that social workers need to have a good understanding of how their practice and delivery of services are affected by personal and structural issues surrounding cultural and ethnic differences and the theory of 'Otherness' in order to avoid unfair discrimination against different ethnic and cultural groups. The article considers the key research findings, theoretical perspectives and models that can help the profession to reflect on what it does, and how, in order to develop understanding of cultural differences and cultural sensitivity in order to understand and work effectively with such cultural differences.

If the profession does not address these issues, social workers can find themselves reinforcing (usually unintentionally) oppression of such groups.

The ethical duty to work positively with difference and 'Otherness' issues is presented and promoted by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) /Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) ([www.iassw-aiets.org/](http://www.iassw-aiets.org/)) International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Code of Ethics. All such international and national Codes are based on theories of what is 'good' in professional relationships, e.g. respect, empowerment- and therefore what are 'good' actions when we are confronted with dilemmas in practice around cultural issues. The IASSW/IFSW Definition of Social Work states that "*The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in*

*human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, Social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work*". The Ethics in Social Work, Statement of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) states that:

#### **‘4.2. Social Justice**

Social workers have a responsibility to promote social justice, in relation to society generally, and in relation to the people with whom they work. This means: *Challenging negative discrimination\** - Social workers have a responsibility to challenge negative discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ability, age, culture, gender or sex, marital status, socio-economic status, political opinions, skin colour, racial or other physical characteristics, sexual orientation, or spiritual beliefs.

*(\*In some countries the term "discrimination" would be used instead of "negative discrimination". The word negative is used here because in some countries the term "positive discrimination" is also used. Positive discrimination is also known as "affirmative action". Positive discrimination or affirmative action means positive steps taken to redress the effects of historical discrimination against the groups named in the clause above. )*

*Recognizing diversity* - Social workers should recognise and respect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the societies in which they practice, taking account of individual, family, group and community differences.’

These principles and duties are set out in the England context by its General Social Care Council (GSCC) Codes of Conduct, which all qualified social workers there must abide by, Social workers must:

- Protect the rights and promote the interests of service users and carers
- Support service users’ rights to control their lives and make informed choices about the services they receive
- Respect and maintaining the dignity and privacy of service users;
- Promote equal opportunities for service users and carers
- Respect diversity and different cultures and values
- Promote the independence of service users and assisting them to understand and exercise their rights
- Not discriminate unlawfully or unjustifiably against service users, carers or colleagues
- Not condone any unlawful or unjustifiable discrimination by service users, carers or colleagues ([www.gsc.org.uk](http://www.gsc.org.uk))

Zavirsek *et al.* (2010) note how issues of ethics and cultural values involve how social workers need to approach cultural differences in terms of

- Human rights
- Resistance to unfair discrimination

- Eurocentrism

They argue that social work must develop responses to:

- Oppressive political regimes
- Breaches of human rights
- Understanding the place of faith and religion in informing our ethical stances.

Therefore, social workers must constantly review and develop such values and knowledge in their own practice. Cultural differences require social workers to appreciate the strengths of different cultural practices (see e.g. Graham's work on African centred approaches set out later in this article), and also the problems involved in 'cultural relativity' rather than 'cultural sensitivity'.

Social workers need to learn how to apply these considerations in their agencies and their personal practice. There is no simple 'cookbook' with a set of recipes to help them to respond to the complex sets of causes and effects concerning the potential conflicts within different cultural, ethnic and faith traditions for these groups, applied with particular clients at that particular time. Social workers cannot achieve this without sound ideas and learning from theories and research. This then provides for a clear appreciation of cultural understanding. This is what this article sets out to do.

Social work and social work education need to begin to examine how there may be very different value bases in different ethnic/religious groups which may be at odds with Western libertarian, individualistic social work values. This is true, for example, of Muslim, Sikh and Buddhist approaches to morality and ethics. Such issues can be particularly contentious in relation to definitions of child abuse and how social workers work in culturally sensitive ways, without exhibiting cultural relativism (see Dingwall et al. 1983; Corby, 2000), and youth offender work (Sender and Littlechild, 2006).

#### *Construction of childhood*

Across Europe, and to an even greater extent other countries around the world, there are great differences in how childhood is constructed. Children and young people who offend are dealt with very differently, with different ages of criminal responsibility and how the official agencies and local communities may deal with such issues. In the child protection field, there are major differences in the construction of childhood and ideas concerning abuse around the world and in Europe (see e.g. Hetherington *et al.*, 1997). It can tend to be assumed within UK and Eurocentric policy and practice constructs that life is inherently better for children and young people in places in the industrialised world such as the United Kingdom than in other 'poorer' or 'less developed' parts of the world (Graham, 2002; Simpson and Littlechild 2009). It is therefore important to acknowledge for children and their families, not only the difficulties they may have from separation, trauma and loss from leaving their own country (and often the circumstances in which they left their country of origin), but also the uncertainties socially, economically and

politically they may face on arrival in the United Kingdom, and their attempts to adjust to a very different society, where there are expectations and pressures on young people in very different ways than they are used to.

These experiences of childhood are ones that are quite different from that experienced by most children born in England in non-immigrant families.

Experiences of children in different cultures/countries are going to depend on a number of factors. For example:

- Refugees and asylum seekers, including the possibility that they may have been child soldiers. They may well have experienced trauma as part of genocide or violent oppression of their families
- Children who have been exploited, including child trafficking, commercially sexually exploited children and child labour (see e.g. Manion, 2004)
- The family experiences of children, including adoption and other substitute families; e.g. private fostering. In the case of Victoria Climbié, a child was killed by her aunt and uncle who were fostering her privately, Victoria having been sent to them by her parents in Africa. However, the social workers did not challenge the abuse of her, as they were fearful of being accused of being racist by ‘accusing’ the aunt and uncle of abuse.

Eileen Chase’s research (2010), based on interviews with 54 young asylum seekers, examined issues for them in the UK and for those working with them. Chase describes how young Asylum Seekers attempt to make sense of their situation in a foreign country, and the systems and personnel who deal with them. The study provides valuable knowledge on how young people take their own agency within these processes, constructing their own reality, and how they choose to divulge information- or not- to whom. Using Foucault’s ideas about the effects of dispersed power, which in turn draw upon Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’ prison construct, Chase offers pointers on how social work can best draw upon service user narratives- vital in understanding clients’ experiences of our services to them, including understanding and sensitivity to cultural differences- in order to understand their reality. This is a prerequisite to formulating strategies within agency and professional parameters to counter any unfair discrimination. Chase provides insights on how service users respond to being under scrutiny by agencies, and controlled by them, as well as the types of resistance they may choose in response. For social workers, the issues of their role as controllers /carers becomes very apparent in these circumstances, as do the possibility of problematical issues in this area of work.

As one example of what social workers need to appreciate and use in their practice, Lonne *et al.* (2009) note that “*Cultural difference has been an area where child protection policy and practice has, at the very least, faltered and frequently failed children and families*” (p.77), discussing how in particular Indigenous families in e.g. Australia have suffered because of this. We also know that it has led to an over-representation of young BME groups in the more controlling responses in England- e. g. police stop and search, custody- to young people in youth justice areas.

The provisions of the United Nations emphasize these issues. The United Kingdom signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in December 1991. The UNCRC had been signed by 177 countries by 1995, an unprecedented level of support for a United Nations Convention. Countries comprising nearly every religion and language in the world have ratified it.

Social work then needs to ask the question, then, what should these children expect from social workers and social work agencies?

Amongst the many sections within the United Nations Convention several are particularly relevant to cultural issues.

Firstly, non-discrimination, as set out in article 2: *'States parties shall respect and ensure the rights set out in the Convention to each child within the jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parents' or legal guardians' race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status'*.

Secondly, *'States parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or position of the child's parents, legal guardians or other family members. In addition to this non-discrimination requirement, the principle of the best interests of the child must underpin any legal or other intervention. Therefore, children's rights should not be subject to restrictions because of their legal status'*.

These provisions obviously affect how we approach issues of culture in social work practice, and the need to take them into account in order for social workers to counter unfair discrimination.

#### *Cultural Identity*

O'Hagan (1999: 273) argues that cultural identity is a sense of sameness and belonging and is the product of *'values, ideas, perceptions and meaning, which have evolved over time'*. Culture for many migrant families is a way of keeping connected to their past. Dosanjh & Ghuman (1997: 300) argue that *"for many Punjabi families religion is the key element upon which their identity is nurtured and formed"*. Such arguments may equally apply to Muslim, Hindu and other immigrant families. The recent arrival of significant numbers of Polish families to the UK, following the expansion of the EU, has seen a considerable increase in attendance at Roman Catholic Churches. Thus, for many migrant people's culture, often expressed through religion, this has great significance for their personal identity (Simpson and Littlechild, 2009).

These issues can be then placed within an overall theoretical consideration of the theory of *'Otherness'* in relation to our understanding of cultural differences.

#### *'Otherness'*

Ben-Ari and Strier (2010) argue that the French philosopher Emanuel Levinas' conceptualisation of the 'Other' challenges prevalent conceptions of cultural competence and examine the relationship between cultural competence and the 'Other'. Cultural

competence is where social workers understand and positively respond to problematic areas in cultural differences. Having cultural competence means having the ability to appreciate the experiences of, communicate and work effectively with people from different cultures. It can be argued that in order to expand our theoretical and practical framework for working with differences, a comprehensive understanding of the relations between 'Self' and the 'Other' is necessary (Ben-Ari and Strier, 2010).

They argue that the concept of culture is a contested one (Benhabib, 2002) in the various discourses within the construction of cultural competence within the social work profession (Park, 2005). They state that social work must recognise it needs to respond effectively to people of all different cultures, ethnic backgrounds, religions, social classes and 'Other' diversity factors in a manner that recognises and values the worth of individuals, families and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each (see IASSW/IFSW and GSCC Codes of ethics set out previously). The British Association of Social Workers' (BASW) Code of Ethics also asserts that social workers should recognise and respect ethnic and cultural diversity and the further diversity within ethnic and cultural groups, and promote policies, procedures and practices that are consistent with this (BASW (basw.org.uk), 2012).

*Example One: Childcare and protection*

One example of the issues involved in, and responses to, the identification and development of cultural understandings is that of child protection work in relation to interventions with children, young people, their families and carers. The United Kingdom is a country that has a lengthy history of migration and movement of people. When families move countries they bring with them their own traditions and customs, their religious faiths and ways of bringing up their children. Adjusting to a new set of traditions and child rearing 'norms' creates difficulties for families and this is something social workers need to develop an awareness of and sensitivity to. For the families, however, these experiences are often tainted by discrimination in the UK, and at times open hostility, and the fact that often they do not have a readily available, or culturally acceptable, network of support to draw on. They may well be dislocated from community and cultural networks. Many migrants experience a sense of loss for the country they have left. In addition, for many of the more recent migrants to the UK the sense of loss is deepened by the effects of trauma and grief, as they flee war-torn countries (see e.g. Richman, 1998; Huegler, 2005). There are also the effects of migration from the longer history of such movements for families, children and young people; for example for second, third generation and other previous former immigrant families, even if those families have been settled in the UK for many generations. Children who have been socialised in the United Kingdom within, for example, the school system may potentially find this causes cultural strains with family, friends and social structures (Simpson and Littlechild, 2009).

With this knowledge of what the problems may be in the area of culture and ethnicity, social workers can more fully appreciate and take into account key issues when assessing children's needs from this perspective. Social workers need to build upon these findings within their knowledge and value base to use 'projective understanding' (Littlechild,

2000), where they can see the problems they experience from the lived experience of individuals in such groups

Chand (2001) undertook a systematic review of the literature in relation to the assessment of BME families particularly in the area of child protection. Social workers are prone to accept certain stereotypes about the nature of BME families and a general trend to see such families as having ‘weaknesses’ rather than ‘strengths’ and that there is much misunderstanding. He draws attention to language difficulties and the use of interpreters, but more importantly drew attention to child rearing differences, which can vary from culture to culture. Chand emphasizes though that child abuse exists in all cultures and protection is a universal right (see UNCRC articles above). This argues for social workers to assess strengths of families in response to the difficulties the latter must address in response to the problems they may face.

In relation to this, Chand touches on the strengths of other forms of child rearing and family structures. Carby (1982) noted the strengths of BME families and argued that the family operates as both a haven from, and resistance to, the racism experienced by Black people, including children. Families from other countries not only have different child rearing practices, but they also experience other factors that make their position more vulnerable (Simpson and Littlechild, 2009).

Graham (2002) examines assessment and intervention by social workers with children and families from other ethnic and cultural groups. In a critical examination of how African cultural practices have been constructed by Western scientific views within a deficit and social problem based approach, Graham looks at the impact upon potentially oppressive views of African cultures within social work practices. Graham explores how African Centred cultures can have a very different construct of family and community life than that which is the dominant view within England, whereby the nuclear family is the dominant culture, and is the lens through which parenting and families are assessed. This can then cause problems when those with such a White Eurocentric view judge African families from within such a perspective, such as that at the basis of the English Government’s Assessment Framework which is used by children’s social work agencies in England and Wales (see Children’s Workforce Development Council (undated)), leading potentially to further problems arising from a deficit based approach. Graham argues that unfair discriminatory views have led to a long term overrepresentation of black people in the public care system, amongst those compulsory admitted to psychiatric units, within the youth justice system, and in school exclusions. Graham sets out important areas for social workers to take into account in the African centered worldview to aid with cultural ethnic sensitivity- as opposed cultural relativism, as discussed further later in this chapter. These areas are set out succinctly by Professor Malefi Kete Asante in the *Foreword* to Graham’s book:

- The interconnectedness of all things
- The spiritual nature of human beings
- Collective/individual identity and the collective/inclusive nature of family structure
- Oneness of mind, body and spirit
- The value of interpersonal relationships

Graham presents this in relation to African centred world views, but her work can be seen as a model of how to look at the effects that culture has on views about families from different backgrounds, and how ethnic and faith issues can be important in relation to how social workers approach and review assessments and interventions for families from different ethnic and cultural traditions.

So we can see that there are weaknesses and strengths in how we try to consider issues of culture. One of the key weaknesses for social workers in England can be cultural relativism.

#### *Cultural relativism or sensitivity?*

Whilst it is important to understand the role that culture plays in understanding the nature of child rearing, and how families might respond to workers and agencies, it is important for social workers to avoid forms of 'cultural relativism'. 'Cultural relativism' is where from often white, middle-class practitioners who have little and/or prejudiced knowledge of a particular culture attribute potentially abusive behaviours to aspects of culture, which they believe they have no right to 'criticise'. By seeing different cultures in purely relative terms, false assumptions can be made about what is acceptable and this can place children at even greater risk, e.g. Victoria Climbié, mentioned earlier. What is needed is a form of cultural sensitivity, which understands the importance of culture in shaping identity and how clients might experience our services, but which also clearly acknowledges social workers legal and moral duty to protect children from abuse (Dingwall et al, 1983).

#### *Black and Minority Ethnic Groups and Youth Offending*

This article now moves into another specific client group area, related to the treatment of BME groups within the Youth Justice System (YJS) in the United Kingdom. England and Wales has seen particular problems in seeing the 'Other' from BME groups as being 'bad' and in need of being controlled in this field. The article now examines possible reasons for why young BME group minorities are often seen as 'Others', and discriminated against within the YJS from the perspective of theories about racism.

The term racism is often used without consideration of the need to define it adequately. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry that reported on into the police service in London found 'institutional racism' in the police (MacPherson Report, 1999), a finding that caused shock waves in the political and media arenas. This UK Government report was ordered following the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence by young white racists, as it was eventually determined to be many years later. The police had assumed that Stephen himself was to blame for the violence as he was black and that he had himself caused the initial violence leading to his death (which was subsequently found to be untrue). The report defined 'racism' and 'institutional racism' as follows:

*Racism in general terms consists of conduct or words or practices which disadvantage or advantage people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. In its more subtle form it is as damaging as in its overt form. (MacPherson Report, 1999: 6.4)*

It goes on to define institutional racism as:

*The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people (MacPherson Report, 1999: 6.34).*

These are the definitions that will be used as a baseline for discussion and analysis in this part of the article.

#### *Overrepresentation of BME group minorities in the UK Youth Justice System*

A number of reports have noted the overrepresentation of people from BME groups in the YJS. For example, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) concluded on the basis of figures examined in 2003 that people from minority ethnic groups were significantly disadvantaged as a result of policies and services within certain areas, and were overrepresented in the YJS.

There is evidence of disparities between different ethnic groups at all stages of the system - from how they are paid attention to as members of the public, through to their treatment whilst in detention, demonstrated in the latter area by the circumstances surrounding the murder of Zahid Mubarek by a known racist cell mate (<http://www.zahidmubarekinquiry.org.uk>). This case highlighted a culture of racist views amongst criminal justice staff, by either not seeing the risks to the black Mubarek, or actively setting up a confrontation by putting them both in the same cell, where the known racist white prisoner had already threatened to kill a prisoner from a BME group.

Police 'Stop and search' data demonstrate a large discrepancy between the policing of black and white people, as black people are seven times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people, relative to the resident population (Home Office, 2002). When arrested, white people are more likely to be given reprimands or final warnings than black people, 16% of the former compared to 11% of the latter. Again, structural and personal issues relating to culture and 'Otherness' can lead to negative assumptions, such as in relation to beliefs that BME groups are more likely to be going to carry out a crime.

Statistics from the English governments' Home Office demonstrate that within the prison population as a whole, 22% of males and 29% of the females are from BME groups (Home Office, 2003) whereas only 7.6% of the population are from these groups (National Statistics, 2002).

The English governments' Youth Justice Board (2004) found that there existed an overrepresentation of BME suspects within all parts of the youth justice system, from arrest through to sentencing, though they were not clear on why such a disparity existed. Such overrepresentation may not reflect higher rates of offending by certain ethnic minority groups. Smith (2003) states that when looking at the results of self-reporting surveys, the

offending rates among young people from all ethnic groups are relatively similar although Asian young people have a lower self-reported crime rate. Such a disproportionately high percentage of BME young people within the YJS must be, as Goldson and Chigwada-Bailey (1999) argue, for reasons other than their participation in offending. Young BME people come into contact with the 'multiplier effect', whereby

*the evidence of overrepresentation of young black people at each stage of the youth justice system, however, produces an overall picture of progressively intensified discriminatory practice* (Smith, 2003: 120).

A study conducted by Wilson and Moore (2003) on the experiences of young black men in custody found both direct and indirect racism and discrimination within young offender units. The few young people who had put in a complaint regarding racism had not experienced a positive response or were not aware of any resulting action. What this means for social work is the requirement within its value base to go beyond the understanding of negative cultural/faith/ethnicity assumptions and prejudices, and to challenge it.

#### *Young Black People and Racism*

Cole (2004) states that racism can be both overt and covert, institutional and personal, with individual and intentional racism as well as unintentional racism. Racism is linked to the 'racialisation' of groups of people, which is historically and geographically specific. From the British Colonial era, there was a racialised concept of 'nation' that was implicit in the rhetoric of imperialism. By the end of the nineteenth century *'the ideology of the "superiority" of the British "race" and the inferiority of Britain's colonial subjects were available to all through popular culture. It had become "common sense" to view the world in this way. Britain had become a dominative and overtly institutionally racist society'* (Cole, 2004: 40). This can then affect attitudes of individuals in social work and other professions towards these 'Other' groups, but also structural cultural issues that affect issues of culture and 'Othering' as well. This is one of the areas social work need to have better understanding of in order to deal with it as best as possible.

Dholakia (1998) discusses the marginalisation of BME groups and how discriminatory processes could be reduced. At different stages within the YJS:

*'there is scope for discretion in making decisions. If discrimination – whether intended or not – occurs at any of these stages, it will have a cumulative effect on what happens next, all the way through the system, being reflected in the prison population figures'* (Dholakia, 1998: 101).

Discrimination within the YJS is viewed by a number of commentators in this field as simply being a reflection of the inequalities that exist within wider society (Goldson and Chigwada-Bailey, 1999). BME groups are more likely to live in deprived areas and be poorer, and therefore come into contact more frequently with the CJS. The system then amplifies and/or compounds these inequalities, examples being found in the child protection and looked after children systems, where there exist a disproportionate number

of children and young people from ethnic minorities, particularly black children. In 2001/2, the population of looked after children (in the public care) in England comprised 18% from BME groups (<http://www.dh.gov.uk:PublicationsAndstatistics>), whilst during that period only 8 % of the population were from BME groups (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=273>).

Chand (2000) argues that there are numerous reasons for this phenomenon. Racism and unfair discrimination are the main forces as well as issues concerning language and interpreting services, child-rearing differences, poverty and biased social work assessments. There is a large body of evidence to suggest that a high proportion of looked after children then become involved in youth crime.

There is also research that demonstrates a link between children who have been excluded from school and those children who become involved in the YJS (Berridge et al, 2001). The main factors linking to their exclusion of black pupils may be the pupils' attitudes towards authority, being negatively stereotyped by teachers and black males being seen as more aggressive; all areas for social work to address with individual young people, groups of young people, but also with the schools to change this.

Given the evidence of over-representation of BME young people in these areas, and the effects of social exclusion and also possibly individual decision-makers' views and prejudices about such young people, all of these areas have issues for social work to address. What does this then all mean for social workers to take into account in order for them to practice in culturally sensitive ways, whilst not being culturally relative? We know individual workers can replicate and make worse cultural insensitivity. Recent research has highlighted that there exists a large variability in the decision making process within the YJS (Leiber and Mack, 2003). Bridges and Steen's (1995) research illustrates how values and beliefs held by decision-makers can affect outcomes. This subjective element had a strong negative impact on African Caribbean BME youth, who are more likely to be seen as being involved in crime due to internal attributions such as lack of respect and responsibility, while white youth offending was more likely to be attributed to external causes such as poverty and family life.

### *Conclusion*

This article has examined the processes and effects of unfair discrimination, and why it may occur in social systems, and within individual workers, for individual professionals to learn from and take into account in ethical practice. It has set out the key issues that social work needs to address in order to understand the current evidence of effects of potentially discriminatory practices in relation to cultural, faith and ethnicity issues, and the issues that social work needs to address to start to ensure that it does not replicate or exacerbate these problems in the structure and processes of State attitudes and provision for those from diverse backgrounds.

Several themes have been explored in order to achieve this: the types and depth of discrimination; the role played by professional decision makers; and the overall impact of lack of appreciation of cultural issues has on policies and practices. We have examined in particular the roles played by ethnicity and other cultural factors in structures and outcomes of child protection and youth justice systems; professionals personally need to consider these matters within their personal attitudes, knowledge, and professional roles. The article sets out how social workers have an ethical duty to understand these issues, and how to work positively with them to avoid unfair discrimination on the grounds of 'Otherness', from an understanding of how the complex process of 'Othering' and debates about cultural differences and Otherness raise fundamental questions for social work.

Social work practitioners need to have a good knowledge about and then respect diversity as an essential feature of effective interventions. Knowledge about how agencies and individuals frame and then treat the 'Other' is a precondition for cultural competence that it is possible to learn.

If social work does not address these issues, social workers can find themselves reinforcing oppression of such groups through lack of theoretical perspective, research knowledge and the committed application of key social work values.

One key response to this knowledge is to develop more emphasis in training, education and supervision on these matters that addresses both structural and personal effects of possible prejudices/unfair stereotypes towards BME groups. The personal responsibility for social workers to challenge their own, and the systems they work in if there is unfair discrimination, has been set out in the article.

In order to deal with these issues, social work and social work education need to

- Use literature and research to inform reflective practice
- Consider students and professionals own prejudices and predilections
- Ensure students and professionals appreciate how these processes and the effects of them feels for people from BME groups, by way of knowledge input, exercises, role play, and case studies
- Listening to the voices of BME groups by direct input to training and education form them, and also by way of research such as that from Chase (2010)

All of this needs to be contained within an overriding appreciation of the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Agencies and professionals need to promote cultural identity in clients within their values and perceptions which have evolved over time, as for many migrant and BME families this is an important way of keeping connected to their past. However, whilst ensuring that social work does not unfairly discriminate against BME groups, the balance must then be

made in order to ensure they do not fall into the trap of cultural relativity, which can disadvantage the most vulnerable such as children who are being abused. Whilst it is important to understand the role that culture plays in understanding the nature of child rearing, it is important for social workers to avoid 'forms of cultural relativism', where social workers who have little and/or prejudiced knowledge of a particular culture attribute- and possibly excuse- potentially abusive behaviours to aspects of culture.

This balancing act is key to social work using its knowledge and values to protect groups but also the most vulnerable individuals within those groups.

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