


The Impact of Social Work Practices in the United States of America with a Multicultural Structure

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abstract

This study examines the role of social work practice in adapting to social diversity in the United States, a multicultural society. The historical development process of social work in the USA and various social work fields are discussed from the perspective of cultural awareness and social justice advocacy. The study focuses on social service areas such as family, poverty, child and youth problems, old age, disability, and education, and evaluates the potential of practices in these areas to ensure social welfare and strengthen social cohesion. The findings show that social workers' provision of services sensitive to cultural diversity is effective in overcoming systemic barriers experienced by disadvantaged groups. At the end of the study, it is recommended that cultural competency trainings should be increased, and community-based programs should be expanded for social work in the USA to better adapt to the multicultural structure. This study analyzes the practices in the USA for the development of more effective service models in the field of multicultural social work and sheds light on future research.

Keywords: *multiculturalism, social work, cultural awareness, social service*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The coexistence of societies with different cultural structures has remained an important problem to be solved throughout history. In this context, while some states have adopted policies aimed at eliminating these differences when faced with groups different from their own ethnic and cultural structures, other states have been able to implement the policy of coexistence of differences more successfully than others (Aktay, 2003, 57). While certain problems faced by individuals in social life and the solutions offered at the micro and macro level to these problems are universal, some of them are culture specific. This situation, which shows similarities and differences on the basis of society and culture in the historical process, constitutes the basis of the social work profession in terms of ensuring the active participation of the individual in social life. Describing the basic problems and solutions produced in the problem areas related to social work arising from the social structures of different cultures contributes to the field of social work from various perspectives (Cantekin, 2019, 292). By examining the social structures and social service areas of different cultures, it is possible to analyze similar problem areas between cultures, to identify differences and to make comparative analyses of social problems and solutions.

Social work practices are more common in heterogeneous societies where social diversity and cultural differences are intense (Uzunaslán, 2022, 181). When it comes to cultural diversity, the first country that comes to mind in the world is the United States of America. The USA is considered one of the most developed countries in the world; it has achieved this position thanks to its political, economic, demographic, and social conditions. In addition, the USA is seen as one of the pioneering countries in the field of social work practices (Aktan, 2014, 44). Multiculturalism has had a great impact on the field of social work in the United States after its 100-year history. It does not matter which racial or ethnic group a social worker belongs to; what really matters is the knowledge with which a social worker must understand the client and his or her problems (Hugman, 1996, 131).

Self-awareness of one's own privileges is necessary for multicultural counseling. This awareness is of great importance for social workers to understand the complex dynamics of race and privilege in their interactions with clients from different backgrounds. The inclusion of social justice themes in social work pedagogy supports the development of a critical consciousness among practitioners, which in turn enables them to challenge systemic inequalities more strongly (Mindrup et al., 2011, 20).

The purpose of this study is to reveal the current problems in the field of social work stemming from the ethnic and cultural diversity in the multicultural United States and the social and cultural contributions of the institutional solutions to these problems for the country. The study addresses social service areas such as family, poverty, childhood and youth, old age, criminality, disability, education, and unemployment; and it also furnishes some relevant information on the services provided by the state to cope with these problems. This study sheds light on the important social and cultural contributions of social work on a country basis.

2. MULTICULTURAL SOCIAL WORK

A fundamental aspect of multicultural social work is that cultural competence is considered a vital skill for practitioners. It involves the ability to understand, communicate, and interact effectively

with people from different cultures. It includes awareness of one's own cultural biases, knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and the skills needed to relate to clients from different backgrounds (Ramsey et al., 2003, 19; Ulutaş et al., 2022, 331). This competency is necessary for social workers to provide effective services and advocate for social justice in multicultural contexts (Zalaquett et al., 2008, 323; Constantine et al., 2008, 348). Multicultural social work is an approach that emphasizes the importance of understanding and integrating different cultural perspectives into social work practice.

Multicultural social work is closely linked to social justice advocacy. Effective social work must address the cultural values and beliefs of diverse clients while addressing systemic barriers that impede their well-being (Ratts and Greenleaf, 2018, 1). The rise of multicultural and social justice movements has led to the development of multicultural and advocacy competencies (Toporek et al., 2009, 260). Multicultural social work practice also includes understanding the historical and social contexts of different cultural groups. For example, the experiences of refugees and immigrants are shaped by their unique backgrounds, which can impact their integration into society and access to resources. It has been determined that participation in outreach programs targeting refugee populations can enhance social workers' multicultural competencies and advocacy skills, thereby increasing their effectiveness in serving these communities (Nilsson et al., 2011, 413). Multicultural social work is seen as a critical approach that aims to increase the effectiveness of social work practice by bringing together cultural awareness, competence, and social justice advocacy. As demographics continue to change, the importance of a multicultural perspective in social work will only increase, creating a need for ongoing education and training for social workers to respond to the diverse needs of the communities they serve.

3. MULTI-CULTURAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States stands out as the country with the most ethnic diversity in the world. Although countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand follow the United States in this regard, the United States has long been the main destination for immigrants.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries are of critical importance in the development of the social work profession. With the economic crisis experienced in the United States in the early 1890s, philanthropic organizations and volunteer organizations made their services more effective in supporting the lives of individuals in despair. During this period, the need for professionals trained in social work methods also increased and in line with this need, the New York Philanthropic Society pioneered the provision of courses for social workers in the country. As a result of these experiences, 17 social work schools were established in the United States by 1919 and these schools formed the American Association of Schools of Social Work (Acar and Duyan, 2003, 3). From the beginning of the 20th century onwards, social work began to focus on the social environment in which individuals lived. The concept of philanthropy developed with a more positive perspective to prevent social disorders and ensure individual welfare. During the same period, structures such as councils, federations and funds emerged; "Community Welfare Councils" established by existing social welfare institutions struggled with problems such as unemployment and poverty, especially during the Great Depression (Koşar, 1986, 85). The mid-20th century was a period when significant social problems affecting large masses were experienced. This situation required social workers to find solutions to human problems, and new problem-solving methods and theories were developed during this period. During these years, social work acquired a strong theoretical infrastructure, and its professional identity became more apparent. However, by the end of the 20th century, there were disappointments in terms of the social welfare system; unemployment and

poverty problems continued to remain on the agenda. During the same period, interest in social problems such as homelessness, AIDS, substance abuse, peace and justice increased in the USA (Acar and Duyan, 2003, 16).

When we look at the social service areas in the USA today, we see that family, poverty, childhood and youth, old age, disability, and education are important in the functioning of society.

In the context of the concept of family, the family institution in the USA stands out as a structure that varies in terms of definition and function. With the increase in divorce, remarriage and cohabitation rates, the traditional family structure where both mother and father are together is gradually decreasing. With this change in family structure, the roles assigned to mothers have also changed and as more mothers join the workforce, they have started to take their place among the individuals who undertake the breadwinner of the family (PEW Research Center, 2015). It is seen that 40-50% of marriages in the USA end in divorce, and this rate is higher in remarriages (APA, 2024). According to the American Family Survey conducted by Kopowitz and Pope (2018) “it is not the case that the American Family is in steep decline, or that it is achieving new highs”(63). The same survey, which was conducted by 3,000 American adults, clearly indicates that the main problems of the American family are classified as economic, cultural, family structure and stability-related problems (4). Social services are provided under various headings in the USA to provide support to the family. These services include early childhood and childcare, educational services including special education, employment and development programs for youth and adults, family health services (pregnancy, dental health, prenatal care, adolescent pregnancy prevention and nutrition for women, infants, and children), housing (for low-income families), short-term care, services for children and youth with disabilities, and family planning. These services are provided through home visits, parent training, parent support groups and family support centers (Cantekin, 2019, 295).

Poverty is one of the important service areas of social work. Among the reasons why working-age individuals experience poverty in the USA, factors such as illness or disability (30%), lack of education (28%), family reasons (26%), early retirement (10%) and inability to find a job (6%) stand out. According to the 2023 data, the overall poverty rate in the USA was determined as 11.1%. Ethnic-based poverty rates were recorded as 75.3% for whites, 13.7% for blacks, 6.4% for Asians and 19.5% for Hispanics or Latinos (USCB, 2023). The USA sees the problem of poverty as largely outside the responsibility of the state. In this context, policies to combat poverty are mostly carried out by charitable individuals and organizations. The state encourages philanthropy and provides support in the fight against poverty by providing high tax deductions to individuals and organizations that carry out these charitable activities (Korkmaz, 2023, 163).

Child and youth Issues also constitute an important area of social work in the USA. In general, the main problems faced by children in the USA include poverty, child abuse, health problems, child labor, malnutrition, child delinquency and child military service. These problems may also vary according to ethnicity. For example, although American laws on child labor are generally effectively implemented, thousands of children, especially Hispanic children, are employed in agricultural work that requires intense physical effort. To prevent these problems, the US federal government provides resources to states to implement various social welfare programs. These programs include Food Assistance (The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program SNAP), Health Services (Medicaid and The Children’s Health Insurance Program CHIP), Housing

Assistance (rent support and The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program LIHEAP), Financial Assistance (Welfare or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families TANF and Supplemental Security Income SSI) as well as unemployment insurance support (Cantekin, 2019, 296).

The issue of old age is an important problem area in the USA. The main problems faced by elderly individuals can be examined under the headings of physical and mental health problems, costs of health services, nursing home care, financial security, loss of relatives, social isolation and loneliness, and elder abuse (Pardue-Spears, 2018, online). The federal government takes various measures and carries out programs regarding these problems of elderly individuals. The services provided within this scope include housing support, health support (Medicare and Medicaid), nutritional support including meal services for elderly people with disabilities or living alone, vocational development and employment programs. The most important institution that coordinates services for elderly people is the Administration for Community Living (ACL). Its web site briefly says: “The Administration for Community Living (ACL) supports the needs of the aging and disability populations, and improves access health care and long-term services” (usa.gov).

In the USA, disability is one of the social problem areas that affects society the most. The basic sociocultural value that affects the development of the phenomenon of disability is individuality. The individualistic structure of American society also affects other sociocultural values, making it difficult for disabled individuals to integrate with individuals with other types of disabilities. In addition, disabled individuals in the USA are exposed to prejudice and discrimination, such as African Americans and other marginalized groups. These discriminatory attitudes have inspired the development of the disability movement that has adopted an advocacy approach that combats discrimination. “The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)’ has been the main protection for people with disabilities against discrimination in employment, public accommodations, public transportation, and telecommunications” (Scotch, 2000, 213). In this context, the American Independent Living Movement arose to emphasize that disabled individuals have the same options and degree of freedom as non-disabled individuals (Güloğlu, 2022, 83). Since then, there have been various assistance programs carried out at the federal and state levels for the disabled. These programs provide services in the areas such as housing, employment, transportation, health services, education, justice, veterans, financial assistance, and general life support. In addition, there are some institutions that provide services in special areas. These include organizations such as the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN), the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) affiliated with the Department of Education, and the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) (Cantekin, 2019, 299).

When we look at the fundamental problems in the US education system, the following topics stand out: insufficient parental involvement in their children’s education, frequent school closures, crowded classrooms, negative effects of technology, limited program diversity for students with special abilities, stagnant investments in education, outdated teacher training methods, and insufficient room for innovation. In addition, students who drop out of school are vulnerable to delinquency. Inadequate studies on students who drop out of high school, inequality in education, academic achievement levels below expectations, school security issues, decreased prestige of the teaching profession, and inadequacy of services for students with disabilities are also considered important problems. In addition, difficulties in teaching English as a second language, especially for refugees and immigrants, violence in schools and peer bullying are among the other important problems encountered in the US education system (Lynch, 2017, edweek.org).

The field of school social work makes significant contributions to the solution process of problems experienced in education. The main service groups of this field are aimed at students, families, school personnel, residents of school districts, and all individuals related to the school-community relationship. For example, services for students include activities such as guidance on strategies to increase academic success, providing conflict management and anger management support, and helping them develop proper social interaction skills (sswaa.org, 2024). In the USA, most school social workers are employed in elementary and secondary schools. While some specialists work with different age groups, others are responsible for a specific age group. School social workers are increasingly working in preschool programs or with special population groups such as homeless students (Aktan, 2014, 48).

4. EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MULTICULTURAL SOCIAL WORK

Developing cultural competence in terms of social work is a process that involves going through various stages from cultural inadequacy to cultural competence. This model is important for social workers to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to work with various population groups.

Multicultural education integrated into social work curricula will enhance practitioners' understanding of multicultural principles and enhance their ability to effectively serve diverse populations (Akintayo et al., 2016, 395). This will prepare social workers to navigate cultural complexities and create space for social justice and advocacy in social work practice.

Cultural awareness is an essential component of cultural competence. Cultural awareness involves recognizing one's own cultural identity and prejudices. Social workers should understand how their cultural background affects their perceptions and interactions with their clients (Balaba, 2023, 44). Cultural sensitivity involves recognizing and respecting the cultural differences of clients. Social workers should be sensitive to the unique experiences and challenges faced by individuals from different backgrounds. Aydın et al. (2019, 1029) state that educators play a vital role in promoting cultural sensitivity among students, which is essential for creating inclusive learning environments

At the cultural proficiency level, social workers not only apply their knowledge and skills but also advocate for systemic changes that promote equity and social justice (Ratts et al., 2016, 28). Developing multicultural and social justice competence is a lifelong process in which counsellors aim to continuously advance their understanding of and commitment to multicultural and social justice competence and to practice cultural humility in their work (Hook et al., 2013, 353).

The social work profession places an emphasis on working with minority populations, particularly African Americans (Basham, 2004, 290). The political dimension of multicultural social work education also plays an important role in shaping an effective practice. It is discussed how political relations and power dynamics affect social work education and practice, especially in multicultural contexts (Nadan et al., 2015, 362). Politics in social work are relationships and activities that reflect differences in power and values and that influence critical decisions regarding the distribution of resources, rights, access, opportunities, and status (Reisch and Jani, 2012, 1135). The effectiveness of social work in a multicultural society is increasingly recognized for meeting the diverse needs of clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

4.1 Multicultural Competence in Social Work Practice

Culturally sensitive social work practice recognizes diversity within and across cultural groups and seeks to address the unique needs and challenges faced by marginalized communities (Dorsett et al., 2015, 896). Multicultural competence and cultural sensitivity are interrelated concepts that are important for effective social work practice in diverse communities.

Multicultural competence refers to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable social workers to work effectively with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. It includes understanding one's own cultural biases, learning about different cultural values and practices, and developing the ability to adapt interventions to be culturally relevant. Competence encompasses awareness, knowledge and skills to connect effectively with various ethnicities and cultures from diverse groups. Multicultural competence can be defined as a unique categorization of awareness, knowledge and skills to work efficiently in a culture.

Cultural sensitivity is the ability to recognize, appreciate and respect the unique cultural characteristics and experiences of individuals and communities. It means being aware of one's own cultural biases, avoiding stereotyping, and adapting communication and intervention strategies to be culturally appropriate.

Multicultural competence and cultural sensitivity are important for social workers to provide effective and equitable services in multicultural contexts. Multicultural competence provides knowledge and skills, cultural humility promotes an attitude of openness and respect, and cultural sensitivity guides the tailoring of interventions to meet the specific needs of diverse clients.

4.2. Multicultural Education in Social Work Curricula

In preparing social workers for social work practice, it is important to include course content related to cultural competence in an up-to-date curriculum (Melendres, 2020, 108). Social work curricula emphasise diversity and difference to train social workers who are culturally competent and provide practices that are sensitive to clients from different ethnic and racial groups (Boyle and Springer, 2008, 53). This awareness is important for developing empathy and respect for clients' cultural backgrounds.

Multicultural curricula and teaching strategies should be incorporated into social work programs to prepare future practitioners for the complexities of working in diverse settings. To support the integration of multicultural societies, it is vital to implement policy measures that support improving people's attitudes towards refugees (Butkus et. al., 2016, 296). In addition, teachers need to confront their own attitudes towards migrant and refugee children and create classrooms where multicultural education and respect for all children take place.

As social workers begin to recognize their own cultural identities and biases, they move to the stage of cultural awareness. This means understanding the importance of culture in shaping individuals' experiences and perspectives. Culturally competent practitioners are needed to ensure social justice for clients, increase accessibility to available resources, and meet respective needs (Gallegos et al., 2018, 51). By promoting cultural competence, social workers can improve their practice, promote social justice, and better serve the communities they work with.

4.3. Effective Strategies for Working with Diverse Populations

In social work practice effective strategies for working with diverse communities include a multifaceted approach that emphasizes cultural competence, humility and sensitivity.

To develop cultural competence, it is important to develop a deep understanding of diverse cultural values, beliefs and practices. However, it is also necessary to learn about the unique challenges and experiences of marginalized communities and tailor services accordingly. Social workers need to recognize the limits of their own cultural knowledge and the importance of collaborating with clients, recognize diversity within and between cultural groups, and act culturally appropriately when communicating.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article reveals the role of social work practices in adapting to cultural differences in the United States, which has a multicultural society structure. The long-term development process of the social work profession in the United States shows that multicultural social work practices make significant contributions to the social structure. Social workers in the United States offer service models structured according to the requirements of the multicultural society structure and carry out comprehensive support programs to ensure the well-being of various segments of society. Social services provided in areas such as family, poverty, child and youth problems, old age, disability and education offer solutions to social problems by considering cultural diversity and encourage individuals' active participation in life.

It has been observed that social workers' cultural awareness, competence and advocacy of social justice increase service effectiveness in multicultural societies. The inclusion of social justice and cultural diversity themes in the social work curriculum in the USA has strengthened the professional field by contributing to practitioners' development a sense of critical consciousness indispensable in combating social inequalities. In this context, multicultural social work practices serve the goals of supporting social harmony, defending the rights of disadvantaged groups, and increasing individuals' opportunities for self-actualization.

For social work to adapt more effectively to the multicultural structure in the USA and to provide more comprehensive solutions to the various needs of society, increasing cultural competence training of social workers will enable them to provide more sensitive and effective services to different ethnic groups. In addition, it is important to expand community-based programs in the field of social work, especially in regions with a large immigrant and refugee population. The importance of combating discrimination and rights-based services should be emphasized.

The boundaries of this study are limited to the USA example and focus on specific social service areas. In future studies, the impact of multicultural social work can be addressed comparatively with other countries with multicultural societies. In addition, conducting empirical research to determine the effectiveness of multicultural social work will increase the knowledge in the field.

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