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# **The Impact of Cultural Competence Training on Rural Human Service Professionals**

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## **Abstract**

Cultural competence among human service professionals is imperative given the rapidly changing American demographics. Current inadequacy in the delivery of culturally responsive social services is due to insufficient cultural competence training for human service professionals. This research study investigated the extent to which constructivist based cultural competence training influenced rural human service professionals' perceived level of cultural competence. In three regions of Tennessee, rural human service professionals ( $n = 44$ ) completed an electronic survey which included the adapted California Brief Multicultural Scale (CBMCS). Using a correlational-descriptive design by surveying participants, the researcher discovered rural human service professionals perceive themselves as being culturally competent. The variable, training quantity, was a significant predictor of perceived cultural competence.

## **The Impact of Cultural Competence Training on Rural Human Service Professionals**

The way human service professionals (HSPs) are trained to become culturally competent continues to be a concern (Taylor-Ritzler et al., 2008). The inability to deliver continual education courses (e.g., cultural competence training) remains as an on-going issue for the human services field. Cultural competency (CC) requires acknowledging different cultures and addressing the needs that occur because of the diversity within them (Medrano, Setzer, Enders, Costello, & Benavente, 2005). According to Munoz, DoBroka, and Mohammad (2009), human service contributors are being encouraged to have more cultural awareness and cultural responsiveness with their diverse clientele because of the ever-changing characteristics and multiplied differences in American society. This remains to be an issue because there are no standardized or core requirements for in-service courses with respect to public human service training (Milner, Mitchell, & Hornsby, 2004). In addition, the ever-changing conditions across regions, specifically rural areas, such as caseload ratios and limited time available for training, create barriers to accessing training. Milner et al. (2004) concluded that training is the catalyst in promoting culturally responsive practice within public human service agencies. Therefore, attainment is contingent upon how well the agencies goals and vision concurs with CC training, synchronization amid training, and success of other functions within the public human service agency (Milner et al., 2004). HSPs have the ability to mold the CC practice guidelines and training requirements noted in state policy and laws, intrinsically (Landsman, 2007).

One way of determining the appropriate methods of CC training is to determine if the relationship that exists between CC training and perceived cultural competence levels for rural HSPs is from a constructivist viewpoint; or the belief that, in a learning environment, knowledge gained is formed by the learner (Hunter, 2008). In order to develop culturally competent rural HSPs, the human services system may need to adopt a constructivist approach to training to ensure

a direct relationship between the rural HSPs' perceived level of CC and the training. HSPs must be responsive to the cultural needs that arise from the unique cultural backgrounds of their clients. Responsiveness can be accomplished by developing cultural knowledge through exploring one's own ethnocentric ideas and by challenging personal prejudices and assumptions (Sue, 2006).

### Summary of Results

This research study quantified rural HSPs' (i.e., state employed case managers) perceived level of CC in order to define relationships that may have existed between certain demographic variables, identified independent variables, and rural HSPs' perceived level of CC. The independent variables are the training quantity and the training model (e.g., online, classroom). The dependent variable is the HSPs' perception of his or her CC level. The descriptive variables involved with the research study were gender, age, race/ethnicity, level of education, years of employment, and regional assignment.

Researchers administered surveys to 449 HSPs from three rural regions of the state's department. The final sample size,  $n = 44$ , was approximately half of the researchers' expected response size. The low response rate (15%) may have impacted the potential to note significant relationships between some of the individual traits and perceived level of CC. There were no relationships established between demographic factors (i.e., race, gender, highest degree obtained) or training mode and perceived CC level. Skewed results made conducting analyses to determine any existing relationships impossible. The sample ( $n = 44$ ) was largely homogeneous, the majority being college educated Caucasian females between the ages of 30 and 39 years, decreasing the generalizability. Of the 44 participants, approximately 98% were female; 96% White; and 98% held a college degree (i.e., bachelor's or master's). Although there was a sufficient amount of normal data for age, education, and employment years, there were no significant relationships found.

The assessment tool inserted in the participants' survey for this study was the California Brief Multicultural Scale (CBMCS), a 21 item self-report measure designed to measure multicultural competency along four dimensions: Sensitivity, Awareness, Nonethnic Ability, and Multicultural Knowledge (Gamst et al., 2004). Based on the total mean scores at the 0.05 level with CBMCS ( $r_s = -.300$ ,  $p = .048$ , two tails) and the total mean scores for the two subscales, Multicultural Knowledge ( $r_s = -.357$ ,  $p = 0.017$ , two tails) and Socio-Cultural ( $r = -.326$ ,  $p = 0.017$ , two tails), significant negative relationships were discovered. The revealed significant negative relationships were calculated utilizing the independent variable, training quantity and dependent variable perceived CC level. These significant negative relationships imply that more training completed by participants lead to less perceived knowledge of multicultural clients and less perceived ability to work with clients of a different social and/or cultural background. In essence, results indicate that participants perceived their level of cultural competence to be lower, with more training completed. This viewpoint suggests the trainings are ineffective. In contrast, it can also be assumed, the more training completed by participants, the more they realize what is unknown, as perpetuated through training. This assumption can lead to the view that the trainings are effective.

These implications discovered, regarding significant negative relationships, directly addressed the research problem of the need for the human services system to ascertain the effective method to train HSPs to work with culturally heterogeneous clients, successfully (Brown, 2004; Newell et al., 2010). Overall, the participants perceived themselves as being culturally competent according to CBMCS mean scores, defining two as the median based on scale statistics. A CBMCS mean score of 2.83 (70%) would fall in the top one-half, at or above the 50th percentile (Gamst et al., 2004).

## Relevance to the Field of Human Services

The findings of this study may be beneficial for organizations and associations guiding the practice of human services. Organizations and associations can further analyze the perceived level of CC with the CBMCS and focus on promoting change within the human services industry through CC training efforts. The human services industry should continue to communicate actively with states about a CC model based on constructivist principles and the assessment tool, CBMCS. As pressure from federal government and national organizations still exist, increasing communication about constructivism and CBMCS can engage HSPs in the process of change. In addition, in order to promote successful change initiatives related to cultural responsiveness, leaders implementing change within the human services profession should acknowledge individual perceived CC levels and provide CC training centered on constructivism (Al-Weher, 2004).

Traditionally, HSP training is based on culture diversity curricula, which fails to increase the participants' knowledge base, skill level, or change their attitudes. The concern regarding CC in human services will remain until there is an achievement of more uniformity within the profession and across professions employing assessment as a practice. The utilization of future research will assist in determining the success of strategy implementation following the achievement of the desired uniformity.

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