

Multicultural Social Work in Japan The Need for Development

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Abstract. *The number of foreigners in Japan has been rapidly increasing in the last two decades. The noteworthy trend is that the majority of these foreigners are no longer short time visitors and they stay in Japan long term as residents. Since the population of Japan has predominantly consisted of Japanese nationals until recently, social welfare and social service systems have been targeting primarily Japanese nationals. Social work with culturally diverse clients is underdeveloped. In this paper the need for development of multicultural social work in Japan is discussed. Three major areas are presented. The first area is an illustration of the characteristics and problems of diverse foreign population groups in Japan. The second area consists of some key components of micro-level social work skills necessary for intervention with those culturally diverse clients. The third area is represented by a macro-level social work practice, which needs to develop a more adequate service system and a more culturally sensitive community.*

Keywords: foreigner population in Japan, migrant workers, foreign wives, migrants' children, social work

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DIVERSE FOREIGN POPULATION IN JAPAN - CHARACTERISTICS AND PROBLEMS

According to the Ministry of Justice (2007), the number of foreigners who registered for alien registration cards has been continuously increasing and in 2006, it reached 2,084,919, which is 1.63% of the total population of Japan. These foreigners are mostly Asians, such as migrant workers of Japanese ancestry from Brazil and Peru, female migrant workers from the Philippines and Thailand, foreign students from China and Korea and so on. Refugees from Indochina and returnees from China also exist. The majority of them have been forced to leave their own countries due to economic pressure and have come to Japan to look for more opportunities. There is a tendency for these foreigners to settle in Japan and become local residents in Japanese communities.

In multiethnic-multicultural nations such as the United States and Canada, social workers need to work with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds (Barker, 1999). Not only predominant Caucasian culture but also ethnic minority cultures such as Asian, Afro-American, Hispanic and Native American cultures need to be respected and valued in practice. With a rapid increase of diverse foreign nationals, Japan also needs to develop such social work in Japanese contexts (Ishikawa, 2003). There are various psycho-social problems for which social workers need to intervene in diverse foreign population groups. Among them, two particularly major issues are the problems of foreign wives of Japanese husbands and the problems of children of migrant workers as follows.

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The number of foreign wives who settle in Japan as spouses of Japanese men has been significantly increasing. In fact, although the number of marriages with foreign husbands increased only 2.5 times between 1965 and 2000, the number of marriages with foreign wives increased almost 30 times during the same period.

These foreign wives are mostly Asians such as Chinese, Filipinas, Koreans and Thais. Quite a number of these women, especially Filipinas and Thais, come to Japan as entertainers and meet their husbands at their work places. Some others come as brides for farmers in rural Japan where there is a shortage of wives. The majority of these foreign wives stay in Japan as permanent residents (Ishikawa, 1999; Kimura & Ishikawa, 1999).

For foreign wives who settle in Japan, the language barrier is the one of the biggest obstacles for their daily lives. Differences in values and customs between home cultures and Japanese cultures is another big area of difficulty. Marital relationship is another issue. Some foreign women get married to Japanese men as a way to remain in Japan, while some Japanese men get married to foreign women due to difficulty of finding Japanese wives. There are marriage brokers who coordinate marriages between foreign wives and Japanese men and these couples get married without enough time to get to know each other. Lack of mutual respect, understanding and support, communication gap, and different value systems can become problems. Domestic violence cases among couples with Japanese husbands and foreign wives have been increasing.

The number of migrant workers particularly from Latin America has been increasing. Quite a number of them bring their children with them. These children encounter various problems when they go to school. In most cases their parents are planning to go home eventually, thus they view their lives in Japan and education for their children in Japan as temporary. They do not actively encourage their children to acquire knowledge and ability through the Japanese educational system. However, in reality they end up staying in Japan long term, or even almost permanently because of economic reasons. Also, parents are busy working for long hours mostly at factories and cannot help their children with school. Parents' limited Japanese language skills and lack of knowledge of the Japanese school system make it more difficult for them to be involved in their children's education. It is estimated that the number of semi-lingual children who have inadequate language skills both in Japanese and their mother tongue has been increasing. As foreign families stay in Japan longer, there is a tendency that children become more knowledgeable about Japan and have better command of Japanese than their parents. This can lead to situations in which children control their parents and parents have a hard time disciplining them.

STRATEGIES OF INTERVENTION: MICRO PRACTICE In order to work with clients who have culturally diverse backgrounds, social workers need to develop skills and knowledge to intervene effectively. The following are some suggestions extracted from the practice of social workers including the author, who are involved with foreign clients in the Japanese context.

1. Respecting the Client's Socio-cultural Background

It is important to get to know a client's cultural background, including lifestyle and customs, religion and family values. Being knowledgeable about socio-economic conditions in the client's country is another key element to understand a client who migrates to Japan and has a strong desire to remain even after the visa expires. If social workers neglect these issues, social work assessment can be incomplete and intervention might become inappropriate. However, if social workers attempt to understand clients simply based on general socio-cultural knowledge, there is a danger of stereotyping all the clients who belong to the same culture. A client's individual personality, uniqueness of the problems, age, sex, educational level, economic situation, family relationships, support system and the interrelationship of all those elements need to be looked at in addition to general cultural elements.

2. Being Aware of Biases in Japanese Cultural Values

Although culturally sensitive practice has long been an issue in heterogeneous countries such as the United States, it has not been fully recognized in Japan whose population predominantly consists of Japanese nationals. Social workers are unfamiliar with different cultures and they tend to unknowingly impose their values and beliefs on their foreign clients. Social workers need to be aware of their own cultural value systems and ethnocentric attitudes and face up to their unconscious prejudice.

3. Assessing the Client's Adjustment to Japan

Assessment of the client's level of adjustment to Japan is particularly important in working with clients who wish to stay in Japan for the long term or permanently. With the increase of international divorce (Ishikawa, 1996), the number of foreign women who wish to stay in Japan after divorce has been increasing. Some women are reluctant to face their own limited adjustment to Japan and resist going home because of political and economic or personal reasons. Because of the difficulty of entering mainstream life in Japan and becoming financially independent, some women work in the entertainment business or engage in casual relationships with Japanese men which might lead to another problematic situation. Social workers need to assess the client's ability to remain in Japan without losing dignity and safety. Some determining factors are language skills, the existence and quality of a support network and economic sufficiency.

4. Taking an Advocacy Role for the Client

It is important to link the client to various social resources in the community as well as to work with the client face to face. However, neither public nor private sectors are used to working with foreign clients and are often reluctant to get involved in such cases. In addition, clients tend to hesitate to use the Japanese social service system with which they are unfamiliar. Thus, social workers need to take an advocacy role to make better linkage between clients and service sectors. Interpreting their clients' situation to other service providers and educating the providers in making the community resources accessible to the client is especially important and challenging for social workers in Japan.

5. Supplying Suitable Interpreters

The advantage of using an interpreter is obvious, especially when the social worker is unfamiliar with the culture and the language of the client. For many languages, there is a shortage of interpreters. Clients often bring their friends or family members as interpreter, and this is not a desirable situation. If a fair number of foreign clients who speak a particular language are expected, social workers need to screen and pool suitable candidates for interpreters from the community beforehand. Interpreters will be in higher demand for various places such as hospitals, family courts, welfare offices, counseling offices, and so on. Basic training for interpreters is essential.

6. Networking with Formal/Informal Social Resources

Foreign clients are often reluctant to use formal social resources such as child guidance centers, welfare offices and hospitals due to the language barrier, unfamiliarity with Japanese systems or their visa status. In order to connect clients with those formal resources it is important to develop a collaborative working relationship with informal social resources such as ethnic self-help groups, churches, volunteer groups and Japanese language classes in the community. Some informal social resources are highly trusted by foreign clients and networking with them can be an effective way to reach out to potential clients. Also the informal resources can be valuable sources of cultural consultation and language services.

STRATEGIES OF INTERVENTION: MACRO PRACTICE Japan has not yet developed a social environment that includes foreigners as community members. It is not only

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that foreigners need to adjust to Japan but also Japanese society must change to develop a more sound environment for foreign residents. In order to create a more culturally responsive service system and community, various kind of services, programs, organizational administration and research need to be developed. Also, the consciousness raising of helping professionals as well as society in general is necessary.

1. Development of a Multilingual/Multicultural Service System

Two types of services should be developed. The first type is providing factual information services and assisting foreigners with concrete issues such as their daily life problems, and medical and legal problems. The second type is providing services which require more sensitive professional care such as offering counseling about marital problems, family violence, juvenile delinquency, child abuse and so on.

Bilingual/bicultural workers who share the same cultures and languages with their clients and serve as interpreters or actually serve as social workers could take a very important role in those multilingual/multicultural services. As mentioned in the micro practice section, supplying suitable interpreters can make a big difference in working with clients individually. The existence of interpreters is essential to promote foreigners' participation in the service development and implementation of multilingual/multicultural service system.

2. Development of Japanese Language Programs

Quite a number of foreign residents have to put up with undesirable job conditions because of their limited Japanese. Obtaining sufficient Japanese language ability is essential for foreign residents to be empowered and become more socially and emotionally independent and to promote the clients' level of adjustment to Japan. Affordable and conveniently scheduled Japanese language programs which meet their needs and working hours should be developed.

3. Networking among Organizations and Advocacy at the Organizational Level

It is important that formal social resources such as child guidance centers and welfare offices develop networks and collaborative relationships with informal social resources such as churches and volunteer groups. For effective collaboration, not only networking among individuals in organizations but also networking between organizations should be developed and sustained.

To promote such practice, taking advocacy role at the organizational level is necessary. Thus an individual worker who is knowledgeable about working with foreign clients should take action to promote understanding of foreigners' cases by making manuals and inviting colleagues to work the cases together in stead of simply taking all foreign cases alone.

This principle applies not only to individuals but to organizations too. Many local governments set up sections specifically for handling foreigners' cases specifically. Instead of tackling all the foreigners' cases by themselves, the section should operate as a central station from which to develop the handling of foreign cases by the whole local government system, providing information about foreigners' problems, raising awareness of foreigners' needs within the organization and promoting collaboration among various sections. This kind of organizational change would also enhance networking with informal resources.

4. Cultural Awareness Training for Social Workers and Other Human Service Providers

In order to make human services more accessible to foreign clients, not only social workers but also other human service providers such as health and medical professionals and public servants need cultural awareness training. This training should not only provide substantive knowledge of various cultures but also raise service providers' awareness of their own cultural values and attitudes. The training is particularly effective to develop skills such as "respecting the clients' socio-cultural background", "being aware of biases in Japanese values" and "assessing the clients' adjustment to Japan" previously mentioned. It is very important to change those service providers' perceptions

and raise their consciousness in order to change the quality of services for the foreigners. Social workers who have gone through such training will be able to “take an advocacy role for the client” more effectively. They need to realize that foreign residents are entitled to receive the same kind of services which Japanese residents receive. Moreover, students in social work programs should complete cultural awareness training at their colleges or universities prior to becoming professionals. In 2007, Aichi prefectural government office started a social worker training program specifically focused on working with foreign population in 2007. The purpose of the training is developing basic social work skills as well as culturally sensitive skills for practitioners who have been helping foreign clients in various sectors such as local government offices, NPO’s, schools, hospitals and so on. The spread of this kind of training all over Japan is highly desirable.

5. Development of Intercultural Seminars for Japanese

In order to create a multicultural society where people of diverse cultural backgrounds can live together harmoniously, not only the consciousness of professional service providers but also the consciousness of Japanese citizens must change. Social workers as educators and advocates can conduct intercultural seminars which promote Japanese people’s cultural awareness. Intercultural seminars for Japanese families whose members include foreign wives would be important to improve family relationships.

6. Development of Intercultural Seminars for Foreigners

Intercultural seminars for foreigners are also important to promote their understanding of Japanese culture and value systems. Conflict between foreign residents and Japanese residents can occur because of lack of knowledge of Japanese customs and traditions. In order to prevent such trouble, both Japanese and foreigners should gain knowledge of each other’s cultures. Intercultural seminars should also include information which will be helpful to daily life, such as information about social and medical services, the school system and the law. The purpose of intercultural seminars is not assimilation of foreigners but promoting foreigners’ adjustment by providing useful information. Foreigners’ participation in developing seminars is highly desirable as they themselves would know what is necessary for their empowerment.

7. Development of Practical Research

Research identifying the daily problems and needs of foreigners has been increasing. However, research which has an actual impact on developing service programs or promoting the quality of services is limited. It is necessary to conduct research which is used to make changes in the system. In order to do useful research, participation of service providers, and more than anything else, participation of foreigners’ themselves are essential.

CONCLUSION Japan has never experienced having such a diverse foreign population until last two decades. Japan has not established an adequate social service system to support the foreign population. Social work with culturally diverse clients is underdeveloped. Multicultural social work needs to be developed at both macro and micro level.

In social workers’ direct practice, respecting clients’ socio-cultural background, being aware of biases in Japanese cultural values, assessing the clients’ adjustment to Japan, taking an advocacy role for the clients, supplying suitable interpreters, and networking with formal/informal social resources are effective intervention strategies. In terms of strategies to create a more sound social environment for foreign residents, development of multilingual/multicultural service systems, development of Japanese language programs, networking among organizations and advocacy at the organizational level, training for social workers and other human service providers, development of intercultural seminars for Japanese as well as for foreigners, and development of practical research are recommended.

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