

Incorporating indigenous cultures into social work helping process

Abstract

In western society, the issue of ethnicity and demands for quality services by minorities has become an important issue in social work discipline. Social workers find themselves are more and more working with clients from diverse backgrounds and cultures. To work effectively with diverse people, what they need is not the advanced helping skills, but basic knowledge about different racial groups and their cultures.

In Taiwan, the indigenous people are disadvantage group with lower income and social status, particularly those who lived in remote areas. Therefore, the Council of Indigenous Peoples (CIP) set up the "Family service center for indigenous communities" in 1998, and expanded into "Woman and family service center for indigenous peoples" in 2002. The purpose of the center is to increase the accessibility of information and social service for indigenous women and families in remote areas.

There are 50 centers in 2010, and each center has at least one social worker (some centers even have two social workers depend on the size of the county), plus two assistants. The service centers are encouraged to hire local indigenous woman with bachelor's degree in social work, or studying toward bachelor's degree. And the assistant also needs to enroll in a social work training program which is also sponsored by CIP.

CIP provides supervision program for these centers and I am responsible for two of them. In the process of supervision, I realized that social workers did not adopt any local network into their helping system. For instance, I noticed they have collected tons of materials and are going to distribute to the needy family. I asked them why not just give the materials to the tribe leader, and let him do the distribution. They replied they never thought of that. This act has two benefits; one is to build a partnership with the tribe leader, and even the local social network. Also the leader can regain his power, and start to rebuild traditional helping relationship in the tribe.

Social work is a discipline originated from western societies, and has its own history and social contexts. On the other hand, indigenous tribes in Taiwan have their own histories, and sadly most histories were related to exploitation and neglect from various governments for many centuries. No wonder indigenous people felt skeptical toward social work, not only because cultural conflicts, but because the abusive memory from the past.

This paper discusses the importance of adopting indigenous social organization into helping process. It is important for social worker to develop sensitivity toward indigenous original helping system if they are going to deliver effective services.