Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility

loving one another, working towards justice

URBANALLIANCE

Introduction

Becoming culturally competent and practicing cultural humility are essential to effectively offering direct services. In direct service fields, such as, basic needs provision, child and youth programming, or health care, staff and volunteers have frequent contact with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

All too often, well-meaning people do harm because they lack the knowledge, awareness, and skills to understand how their words and actions are impacting others. By growing in one's cultural competence and increasing cultural humility, staff and volunteers are better able to build strong relationships with people who are different than them and are better equipped to serve others. These concepts go beyond simply encouraging increased awareness and sensitivity to cultural differences. They also compel people to action when a power imbalance or injustice occurs.

Bias and Stereotypes

All people have **unconscious beliefs** about others based on their experiences and the assumptions they make. These beliefs help them to navigate relationships and social situations and understand behaviors. In many cases beliefs are used to justify the power and privilege given to certain people based on social identities.[1]

Unfortunately, all too often, people's beliefs and assumptions are not correct which causes them to draw inaccurate conclusions about other people and their actions. A **bias** occurs when a person has a thought or opinion that is not based on actual experience in favor of or against a thing, person, or group. Often biases are generalized about a group of people. For example, the belief that 'people who do not work are lazy' is a commonly held bias in the US.

In many cases, bias or stereotypes are negative or condemning against a person or group of people. Matthew 7:3-5 addresses this using the metaphor of a person with a plank in their eye. In this text it says,

All too often, well-meaning people do harm because they lack the knowledge, awareness, and skills to understand how their words and actions are impacting others.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

This verse serves as a reminder that we need to be very careful when we form a negative belief, judgment, or criticism against another person. There is likely a plank that biases the way we see the person or situation. A first step in both cultural competency and cultural humility is recognizing the plank in one's own eye.

This requires that a person humble themselves and ask God to reveal the places where they have unfairly judged others or where they hold beliefs that simply are not true.

James 1:19 says, *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."* This other-oriented posture helps people to listen to others and understand their perspective and experiences before making an assumption, judgment, or forming a bias. Learning to listen, remain nonjudgmental and maintain a posture of curiosity about another's perspective helps to reconcile conflicts and build relationships with people who are different.

Social Identity, Power, and Privilege

There are many ways people are different from one another including race, ethnicity, gender, ability (physical and mental), religion, socioeconomic status or class, sexual orientation, age, physical characteristics, educational background, family of origin or family composition, geographic or regional background, language, learning style, and beliefs (political, social, religious).

These differences describe categories of **social identity**. Some identities are things people can see easily (like race or assumed gender), while other identities are internalized and are not always easy

to see (like a disability, socioeconomic status, or education level).[2]

Within each social identity category, some people have greater access to social power and privilege based on their membership in the group. **Power** can be defined as the degree of control over the material, human, intellectual, or financial resources possessed and exercised by groups or individuals. **Privilege** can be defined as the benefits and advantages enjoyed by an individual or group of people beyond the advantages of other individuals simply because of the social group they belong to. [3]

There are two types of identities that need to be defined in order to understand social justice. The first type deals with identities that are part of a majority status, or "agent", while the second includes identities that are part of the minority status, or "target". **Agents** represent dominant social groups privileged by birth or acquisition who knowingly or unknowingly reap unfair advantage over members of the target groups. **Targets** are social groups that are negatively valued, considered to be inferior, abnormal, or dependent and given limited access to resources and social power. [4] See Table 1 for examples of various social identity categories, agent groups, and target groups in the United States.

Social groups are afforded different status, power, and privilege in the United States based on multiple historical, political, and social factors.

Table 1. Social Identities, Agents Groups and Target Groups

Social Identity Category	Agent Group	Target Group
Racial	White people	People of color
Class	Middle/upper class, owning class	Poor, working class
Gender	Men	Women, transgender
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual people	Lesbian, gay, bisexual
Ability	People without disabilities	People with disabilities
Religion	Christian	Non-Christian
Age	Young people	People over 50
Education	People with college degrees	People without college degrees
Immigrant status	U.S. born	Immigrant
Language	English speaking	Non-English speaking

Social groups are afforded different status, power, and privilege in the United States based on multiple historical, political, and social factors.[5] For example, in the United States power and privilege has been afforded differently by race. Racism is prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.

It is well documented that people of color have historically and in the present experienced prejudice, discrimination, and disparities, at the hands of people who are white, in regard to employment, education, healthcare, policing, and the justice system. These disparities occur in interactions between individuals as well as systemically. [6, 7] This history of injustice has contributed to mistrust between vulnerable populations and various direct service institutions as well as skepticism about the purpose and outcomes of research. [8]

Social justice means fair and equal opportunities and treatment for all people, particularly those who are marginalized. It involves correcting power and privilege imbalances that are allotted unfairly to people because of the social groups they belong to.[9] God desires justice. While the term social justice is not found in scripture, there are numerous references to and examples of social justice, and the importance of learning to be in relationship with people who are different.

First, there are numerous references to justice and God's desire for believers to take action when injustice occurs. In the book of Isaiah, God calls believers to, *"Learn to do right; seek justice; defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow"* (Isaiah 1:17). Micah 6:8 says, *"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."* Justice and care for vulnerable groups is very important to God.

Another example is the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25, Isaiah 61, and Luke 4:14-30), which was supposed to take place every fifty years in Israel. It was a celebration that involved returning land allotments to their original families, forgiving debts, freedom from servitude, and rest. Every fifty years everyone was able to start with a clean slate. God instituted the Year of Jubilee as a foreshadowing of His future work on the cross. It was through Jesus' death and resurrection that He relieved us of all spiritual debts and our slavery to sin. It also had very practical implications for the most vulnerable people in society. It allowed for the liberation of those who were held in bondage like servants and debtors and the return of ancestral property to those who were forced to sell their property because of poverty. These systemic interventions protected the rights of the poor.

Further, there are numerous references in scripture that highlight God's desire for people who are different to love and care for one another. 1 Corinthians 12 gives the metaphor of the body to describe how God wants believers to be in relationship with one another. The body contains many different parts, each with different functions. God desires that each part appreciate the others, celebrate the diversity of the body, and learn to work together in love and unity. Galatians 3:28 says, *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

This verse emphasizes that while people may have different social identities, their identity as children of God is primary and brings unity. There are also many examples of people from different groups, who would not normally associate with each other, loving and being in relationships with one another. For example, Jesus speaks with the woman at the well, the good Samaritan helps the injured man, Paul (a Jewish Pharisee) becomes a messenger to the Gentiles, and Jesus invites children to come to Him.

John 13:35 says, *"All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."* Loving one another involves learning to be in relationship with people who are different and helping to bring about justice where injustice exists. Cultural competency and cultural humility are two frameworks that can help people increase awareness, knowledge, and skills that can facilitate reconciliation in relationships and encourage action where injustice exists.

Cultural Competency

Cultural competency can be defined as the ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with people from different cultures or belief systems than one's own. This concept has become an integral aspect of service provision across many disciplines. [10] For example, the American Psychological Association lists it as one of its core competencies and the federal government views it as an important means of helping to eliminate racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in health and mental health care.

Cultural competency encompasses:

- **Being aware of one's own world view**
- **Developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences**
- **Gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views**
- **Developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures**

There are a number of areas of competency needed to effectively and sensitively interact with diverse groups of people. These include awareness, knowledge and skills.[11]

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Micah 6:8

Cultural Competency: Awareness, Knowledge, and Skill

✓ **Awareness:** Each person must grow in their awareness of their own biases and reactions to people who are different. This is the first step in growing one's cultural competency.

- *A person is aware of their own biases including racist, sexist, or other detrimental attitudes, beliefs, or feelings.*
- *A person moves from being culturally unaware to being aware and sensitive to their own cultural heritage and to valuing and respecting differences.*
- *A person is aware of their own values and biases and of how they may affect diverse clients.*
- *A person is comfortable with differences that exist between themselves and the people they serve in terms of race, gender, and other sociodemographic variables.*
- *A person is sensitive to circumstances (personal biases, racial or gender influences, etc.) that may dictate referral of clients to members of their own sociodemographic group or to different service providers in general.*

✓ **Knowledge:** It is important to have accurate knowledge about various cultural groups, disparity and inequality, and best practices related to building relationships with various groups.

- *A person is knowledgeable and informed about a number of culturally diverse groups, especially the groups they are most likely to work with.*
- *People are knowledgeable about the social and political factors that influence service provision (e.g. healthcare, education) to marginalized groups.*
- *People are knowledgeable about institutional barriers such as racism that prevent some clients from accessing social services, privileges, and advantages.*

✓ **Skills:** It is important that people are able to implement practices, communication, policies, and procedures that are sensitive to the person or group of people they are working with.

- *A person is able to generate a wide variety of verbal and nonverbal culturally sensitive responses.*
- *A person is able to communicate (send and receive both verbal and nonverbal messages) accurately and appropriately.*
- *A person is able to anticipate impact of service delivery and its limitations on culturally diverse clients.*
- *A person is able to communicate in easy to understand language that is linguistically and culturally appropriate when working with diverse clients.*

Levels of Cultural Competency

Cultural competency must be considered from multiple levels or vantage points. When receiving a service, a client interacts with a program at various levels. For example, a client may have direct interactions with program staff or be impacted by the program's policies and procedures. Additionally, there are societal influences that are impacting the program and community as a whole.[12] Cultural competency will be strongest when it is considered from the following three levels:
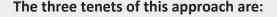
- The individual level, which encompasses the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and behaviors of individual service providers.

- The service level, which encompasses program leadership and management, operational frameworks and practices, expectations, policies, and procedures.

- The system level, which encompasses how the services provided by the program relate to community-level or societal influences such as local policies, state and federal-level decisions, and funding allocation.

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Cultural Humility

The concept of cultural humility was originally developed to address inequities in the healthcare field and is now used in many disciplines, including education, public health, social work, and mental health to increase the quality of interactions between workers and their diverse community members.[13]

Cultural humility has been described as the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented.[16] In the context of relationships, this means maintaining an openness to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the other and a willingness to learn from them. It also requires each person to acknowledge that their understanding of another person's culture and experience is limited. All people have unconscious stereotypes of others and tend to use stereotypes as a "safety net" to help explain behavior. [14]

The three tenets of this approach are:

1) a life-long commitment to self-evaluation, critique, and learning

2) a commitment to fix power imbalances where none ought to exist and promote justice

3) a commitment to develop partnerships with people and groups who advocate for others

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Cultural humility goes beyond reflecting on one's own values, beliefs, and social position within the context of the present moment. It also requires that a person be aware of and sensitive to historic realities, such as legacies of violence and oppression against certain groups of people.

The Public Health Service's Syphilis Experiment at Tuskegee serves as a tragic reminder of how African Americans have been historically deprived of adequate healthcare and have experienced abuse and disrespect in the name of clinical research. [17]

Attributes of Cultural Humility

Research has found that cultural humility is consistently associated with five attributes: openness, self-awareness, egolessness, supportive interactions, and self-reflection and critique. [15]

Openness is defined as possessing an attitude that is willing to explore new ideas. An individual must have an open mind or be open to an interaction with a culturally diverse individual for cultural humility to take place.

Self-awareness is defined as being aware of one's strengths, limitations, values, beliefs, behavior, and appearance to others. An individual must esteem to have a high degree of self-awareness as they interact with others who are different.

Egolessness is defined as being humble and viewing the worth of all individuals on a horizontal plane. An individual must enact a belief system of equal human rights and work to flatten any hierarchy or power differential.

Supportive interactions are defined as intersections of existence among individuals that result in positive human exchanges. Supportive interactions between people must occur as part of the process of cultural humility.

Self-reflection and critique are defined as a critical process of reflecting on one's thoughts, feelings, and actions. Self-reflection and critique are a life-long journey or endless process of continual reflection and refinement.

The more fully a person aspires to embody these attributes the more fully they are able to adopt cultural humility as a guiding lens. By engaging with others in this way, program staff and volunteers are able to build meaningful relationships, characterized by respect, dignity and honor, with the people they serve.

A review of literature examined the outcomes or consequences associated with cultural humility. This review identified mutual empowerment, partnership, respect, optimal care, and lifelong learning as fruits resulting from the process of cultural humility. The literature emphasized that cultural humility entailed a continuous process of self-reflection and learning that resulted in positive transformation. Programs that incorporate this lens at all levels of programming are positioned to yield great service outcomes for the people they serve.

Mutual empowerment, partnerships, respect, optimal care, and lifelong learning are fruits resulting from the process of cultural humility.

Comparing Cultural Competency and Cultural Humility

While both cultural competency and cultural humility are related and important terms, there are some distinctions. The table below highlights similarities and differences between the two concepts.

Table 2. Cultural Competency Verses Cultural Humility

	Cultural Competency	Cultural Humility
Goals	To build an understanding of minority cultures (target populations) to better and more appropriately provide services	To encourage personal reflection and growth around culture in order to increase service providers' awareness
Primary Values	• Knowledge • Training	• Introspection • Co-learning
Shortcomings	• Enforces the idea that there can be 'competence' in a culture other than one's own • Supports the myth that cultures are monolithic • Based upon academic knowledge rather than lived experience and believes professionals can be "certified" in culture	• Challenging for professionals to grasp the idea of learning with and from clients • No end result, which those in academia and medical fields can struggle with
Strengths	• Allows for people to strive to obtain a goal • Promotes skill building	• Encourages lifelong learning with no end goal but rather an appreciation of the journey of growth and understanding • Puts professionals and clients in a mutually beneficial relationship and attempts to diminish damaging power dynamics

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