

Beyond the Tip of the Iceberg
Five stages Toward Cultural Competence
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Understanding the cultures of those we serve requires more than words and good intentions. The journey toward cultural competence requires the willingness to learn from ones experiences and act.

I am fond of saying that the journey toward cultural competence is both lifelong and painful. This is perhaps no better illustrated than through the efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa address the abuses of apartheid so that healing might occur. Established by President Nelson Mandela and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the commission's work has allowed people of South Africa to openly discuss the pain and suffering caused by the intentional and enforced racial and cultural division within their country.

The commission's activities have also opened the doors to deeper cultural knowledge and positive change-key elements in the journey toward cultural competence. Although the United States has only not yet embarked on such a visionary journey to reconciliation, individuals and organizations can open cultural doors to the youth they serve by striving to achieve cultural competence themselves.

Competence and Culture

There is much that we as educators and practitioners have chosen not learn about those whom we serve, even though understanding the culture and history of Asian, African, Latino and Native American people is essential to helping them. One of the most valuable skills we can have is cultural competence-the ability to work across cultures in a way that acknowledges and respects the culture of the person or organization being served.

Dr. Carter G. Woodson may have introduced the concept of cultural competence in 1927 when he put his life on the line to create the Society for the study of Negro Culture and Life and instituted Negro History Week (Goggin, 1993), the precursor of the Black History month. Though these special events have been recognized commercially, few people today understand their origin, significance, or broad social changes they were intended to achieve.

Dr. Woodson was only the second person of African descent to achieve a doctorate in Harvard University, and he was the first Harvard graduate to have been born to enslaved parents. He understood that the country was in danger of splitting apart along racial, regional and cultural lines. As a historian, Dr. Woodson believed that if a people understood their history and contributions to the society in which they lived, then (1) they would feel better about themselves, (2) other groups of people would feel better about the oppressed group and be more accepting of them, (3) there would be greater acceptance between and within groups of people, reducing the level of racism in the society. Although Dr. Woodson was right about the first and the second effects, knowledge alone cannot lead to the third effect. The third effect can only be achieved when all groups in society have achieved cultural competence.

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Perhaps the most salient document to date on cultural competence is *Toward a culturally competent Systems of Care*, Volume I, by Cross, Bazron, Dennis and Isaacs (1989) and Volume II by Isaacs and Benjamin (1991). In this two-volume monograph, culture is defined as the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values and instructions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social group.

Gary Weaver (1986) uses the image of an iceberg to explain these many layers of culture (see figure below). Like an iceberg, part of a culture is “above water” in that it is visible and easy to identify and know. This part includes surface culture and elements of folk culture—the arts, folk dancing dress, cooking etc. But just as nine tenths of an iceberg is out of sight below water, Paige explains, nine tenths of a culture is also hidden from view. This out-of-awareness part of culture has been termed “deep culture” although it does include some elements of folk culture. Deep culture includes elements such as the definition of sin, concept of justice, word ethic, eye behavior, definition of insanity, approaches to problem solving, fiscal expression, and approach to interpersonal relationships. Ogbu (1988) presents this essential idea more clearly when he states that “cultural tasks vary from culture to culture because different populations have worked out to solve different solutions to common problems in life, such as how to make a living, reproduce, maintain order within their borders, defend themselves against outsiders, and so on” (p.13). Cultural competence acknowledges and validates biculturality, a concept understood and practiced by people of color since 1619 in the United States. Biculturality is the ability of people in a minority culture to understand and work within the dominant culture in order to improve the economic and/or physical well-being when they interact with that culture. At the same time, these people are able to retain the knowledge and behaviors of their own indigenous culture, thereby ensuring inclusion and physical, emotional, and spiritual survival within that culture.

Iceberg Model

Culture can be compared to an iceberg, because so much goes undetected. So that within our lives and work it is often ignored. The influence of culture on the elements of communication need to be explicitly explored rather than taken for granted or ignored. The list below shows some of the cultural issues that impact on our interactions:

Surface Culture

LANGUAGE

ARTS, LITERATURE

RELIGIONS, MUSIC, DRESS

DANCE, GAMES, SPORTS, COOKING

Folk Culture

//////////////////// awareness level boundary //////////////////////////////////////

NOTIONS OF MODESTY CONCEPTS OF BEAUTY

Invisible

EDUCATION CHILD RAISING RULES OF DESCENT

COSMOLOGY RELATIONSHIP TO THINGS, ANIMALS & PLANTS

COURTSHIP PRACTICES CONCEPT OF JUSTICE MOTIVATION TO WORK

CRITERIA FOR LEADERSHIP DECISION MAKING PROCESSES DEITIES DEATH

IDEAS OF CLEANLINESS LOCUS OF CONTROL THEORY OF DISEASE PHYSICAL SPACE

DEFINITION OF SANITY, FRIENDSHIP, LOVE, MURDER, LIFE, GENDER, FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

ROLES IN RELATION TO STATUS BY AGE, GENDER, CLASS, KINSHIP, OCCUPATION, RELIGION,

CONVERSATIONAL PATTERNS IN VARIOUS SOCIAL CONTEXTS, CONCEPTION OF TIME & SPACE

PREFERENCES FOR COMPETITION, COOPERATION, INDIVIDUALISM OR GROUP NORMS, SIN, GRACE

NOTION OF ADULTHOOD, NOTION OF LOGIC AND VALIDITY, PHYSICAL SPACE ARRANGEMENTS, LIFE

ODORS, HANDLING OF EMOTIONS, ACCEPTANCE OF FRUSTRATION OR PAIN, CONCEPT OF FAITH

Building Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is not achieved through words alone, but rather through knowledge and the application of that knowledge, an idea implied in Asente proverb, “good word do not food make.” To work toward cultural competence, we must look within and without for a deeper understanding of ourselves and the cultures of the people we serve. We must also act on the knowledge, turning our understanding into more effective programs and services.

The most important ingredient in cultural competence is self-knowledge, the direct results of what Dr. Wad Nobles, an African- American social psychology professor at San Francisco State University, calls *deep thought*. Deep thought is similar to the iceberg in that the thoughtful analysis and understanding of the idea goes beyond the superficial level to that of introspection and self-understanding.

A second vital ingredient in cultural competence is experience. One cannot learn about a people or culture exclusively through books, movies and classes. The Sierra Leone proverb, "a paddle here, a paddle there, -the canoe stays still," predicts the outcome of such one -dimensional efforts. The best teacher is firsthand experience with a culture, if not immersion in it. Although the lessons can be painful, you must touch it, try it, make mistake, apologize, internalize what you have learned, and try again. Honest self-knowledge and unmediated experience with the cultures of the individuals you serve will help you become a far superior helper.

The third ingredient in the cultural competence is positive change. Cultural competence does not exist without demonstrated positive change both in the educational/clinical setting and the real-life environment in which the student or client must function. Cultural competence replaces the earlier ideas of cultural sensitivity and awareness that were often embraced with no corresponding change in behavior.

The Cultural Competence Continuum

James Mason (1993) has devoted years to represent cultural competence as a continuum for organizational and individual assessment. The beauty of this continuum is that with honest self-appraisal, organizations and individuals can determine their present state and measure their change toward cultural competence over time. The cultural competence continuum includes five progressive steps: cultural destructiveness, incapacity, blindness, pre competence and competence.

Cultural destructiveness. The most negative end of the continuum is represented by attitudes, policies, and practices that are destructive to cultures and consequently to the individuals within the cultures. Examples include:

The Tuskegee Experiment. (From 1932 to 1972, the federal Government sponsored an experiment in which doctors studied the impact of syphilis on African-American men who were told their syphilis was merely "bad blood,")

Misuse of psychometric instruments on populations that were not included in the standardization process. (e.g giving the SAT test to Appalachian and sea Island children).

Cultural incapacity. The system or agency does not intentionally seek to be culturally destructive but rather lacks the capacity to help minority clients or communities. Examples include:

1. Not providing bilingual personnel when needed.
2. Drawing accurate but inappropriate clinical or educational conclusions based on the professional's view of the world, not on the child's view that may affect how he or she makes eye contact, respond to group activities.
3. Failing to understand what mistreatment based on cultural background is so it can be avoided. For example, one program serving chronically mentally ill adults, who happened to be African-Americans, would have the patients wait in the waiting room until their day program began. An administrator became worried that the program's paying, Caucasian patients would be uncomfortable with the mentally ill adults and go elsewhere for service. To avoid this, the program began delivering the mentally ill adults to the back of the building. A Caucasian nurse took offense and contacted the NAACP. The practice stopped. The decision had not been intentionally racist, but the outcome was certainly not in the patient's best interest.

Cultural blindness. At the midpoint in the continuum, the system and its agencies provide services with the expressed intent of being unbiased. They function with the belief that color or culture makes no difference and that all people are the same (e.g, the melting pot theory that ignores cultural strength).

However, Ogbu (1988) states that the "competencies minority children acquire or develop in the community are often different from competencies the children are required to demonstrate at school. Researchers have shown that because the competencies minority children bring to school are different from those required, the children encounter conflicts in competencies that caused adjustments and learning difficulties (e.g, verbal versus written emphasis, speech patterns, acceptable behavior). An example of cultural blindness would be treating all clients in the way, regardless of their cultural background.

This was the prevailing attitude when programs and services were developed in response to the civil rights movement. Evidence of this surfaced when I received no nominations of programs that were culturally competent from the Southeast region of the United States. Intrigued, I conducted an informal survey of Caucasian individuals over 50, asking each one what the purpose of civil rights movement was. (persons over 50 were because they would remember it). The unanimous answer was to "everyone the same." The services offered in response to civil rights movement were thus developed to treat everyone equally, not necessarily to treat everyone with his or her best interests in mind.

Cultural pre competence. Agencies and individuals move toward the positive end of the continuum by recognizing cultural differences and making efforts to improve. Examples include:

1. Making the waiting room more welcoming with pictures, magazines, and music that reflect the culture(s) of the community served.
2. Making other cosmetic changes to reflect the community served. (In Asian communities, for example, a bonsai garden might be added outside and green tea might be provided in the waiting room.)
3. Employing people who resemble the population being served or educated. (This is a first step, but does not ensure cultural competence nor does it ensure positive outcomes.)

Cultural Competence. Culturally competence agencies and individuals accept and respect cultural differences, continue self-assessment of cultural awareness, pay careful attention to the dynamics of cultural differences, continually expand their cultural knowledge and resources, and adopt culturally relevant service models in order to better meet the needs of minority populations.

Examples include:

1. Developing cultural resources library.
2. Diversifying the professional staff.
3. Involving the community in the development of services and in planning and decision-making activities.
4. Bringing in representatives of the community served to conduct workshops for the professionals who will serve them. (In children's services, parents are now asked to conduct these workshops.)

Breaking Through

The alternative to working toward cultural competence is to exist in a vacuum, to live in the absence of comparative information on the cultural life of others. If we choose to live in a cultural vacuum, we will not only continue to perpetuate stereotypes we have of other people, but we will also be perpetuating the stereotypes others have of us. Striving for cultural competence will help you break through these stereotypes and enter the deep waters of culture-yours and those you deserve -where you can effect positive, lasting change for the better.

Although moving along the cultural competence continuum is a complex and potentially lifelong journey, the journey does offer tremendous personal and professional rewards. As a professional, you have been trained to know all, to have the answers. But the journey toward the cultural competence begins with the courage to realize that you do not know it all. On this journey, you will learn about yourself in a thoughtful, honest and intense way. You will also learn about other cultures through books, movies, workshops, and, most important, through firsthand contact. Direct experience can lead to the deep knowledge that results in behavior change. One must experience culture directly and on many occasions to acquire its secrets. Even though the doors to this kind of cultural knowledge are more difficult to open in this country, gentle and persistent efforts to become culturally competent can reap significant rewards for the agencies and individuals who work with children, adolescence and their families.

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