Cultural Humility, Microaggressions, and Courageous Conversations

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Abstract: In this narrative, a social work professor describes how he prepared for and implemented a workshop on how to engage in courageous conversations with clients who are expressing racism and religious bigotry. While preparing for the workshop, the professor discovers the relationship between cultural humility, having the courage to reflect upon and admit one's own biases, and engaging others in constructive conversations about microaggressions and bigotry.

*Keywords***:** cultural humility, dialogue, racism, bigotry, microaggression

Introduction

One of the key aspects of cultural humility is openness to others, meaning that helping professionals should not only be respecting of people who are different, but also open to learning from them (Danso, 2018; Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013). A key challenge in implementing this aspect of cultural humility arises when working with people who express morally offensive attitudes and beliefs. For me, this tension came to the fore when I was developing a training for social work field instructors on how to help social work students respond when clients are expressing microaggressions, including racism or religious bigotry (RRB) (McCormick, Lewis, Gonzalez, Horton, & Barsky, 2019).

Under the core principles of the *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (NASW, 2018), social workers have an ethical obligation to respect the dignity and worth of all people. The duty of respect means that social workers should treat people in a courteous and caring manner, honoring differences and supporting people's rights to good treatment regardless of their differences. Under Standard 6.04 of the same code, social workers also have an obligation to promote social justice (NASW, 2018). Promoting social justice means advocating for equal treatment and opportunity for all and challenging discriminatory policies and practices (Barsky, 2019). So, how can social workers honor the obligation to respect the dignity and worth of all when challenging discrimination and injustice may require engaging with people who are espousing hateful views? This article relates how I came to have a better understanding of the connections between cultural humility, having the courage to reflect upon and admit my own biases, and engaging others in constructive conversations about microaggressions and bigotry.

Preparing for the Workshop

As I started to develop the workshop, I reread some of my favorite references on how to engage people in difficult conversations (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010) and how to manage intergroup conflict (Rothman & Alberstein, 2013). Initially, it seemed as though I was preparing a group that was generally respectful and nonjudgmental (social workers) to engage more effectively

with people who were acting in patently disrespectful and judgmental manners. But how do we really understand who these individuals are, what motivates them, and why they might be espousing RRB? I then began to ponder whether the workshop should focus on cultural humility—helping social workers to be open and curious even when they might feel angry or dismissive when others are expressing RRB.

Cultural humility refers to a process that begins with an attitude of *not knowing everything about the client's culture* and having an openness to engage in ongoing learning in partnership with the client (Danso, 2018). To employ cultural humility, professionals need to engage in self-critique and recognize their own prejudices (Danso, 2018), including RRB. Otherwise, professionals may impose their biases on clients, leading to cultural misunderstandings and inappropriate interventions.

The concept of cultural humility struck me as a particularly important element for the upcoming workshop, reminding me that social workers and other professionals are *no better* than their clients. If we want to build effective working relationships with clients, we need to approach them as partners and equals in the helping process. As I struggled with determining the best approach for the workshop, a song from the musical *Avenue Q* (Lopez & Marx, 2004a) came to mind. In the song "Everyone's a Little Bit Racist, " the characters describe how they have laughed at racist jokes, judged others based on race, and described others using racist labels (Lopez & Marx, 2004b). Initially, some characters are reluctant to label themselves as racist. As the song progresses, however, they are more comfortable accepting that each of them is at least a little bit racist. By accepting their racism, they are allowed to engage in more forthright discussions of racism.

When one person admits having racist beliefs, that person models that it is okay for others to openly discuss their racist beliefs. When one person expresses genuine regret about past racist behaviors and commits to positive change, that person also conveys that racism is not a permanent condition. People can then engage in more honest discussions to raise self-awareness of racism. By acknowledging that nobody is perfect, they can also engage in frank discussions about how to overcome racism, including their own.

By reflecting on the song "Everybody's a Little Bit Racist" (Lopez & Marx, 2004b), I realized that if I was going to lead a workshop on how to engage people in RRB discussions, it would be helpful for me to acknowledge my own RRB. By acknowledging my past expressions of RRB, I hoped to make it easier for workshop participants to discuss other expressions of RRB, including their own. I also began to realize that if social workers wanted to use cultural humility to understand and engage with clients, it would be helpful for workers to begin by raising awareness of their own RRB. Accordingly, I began my own process of self-reflection to prepare for the workshop.

Being gay and Jewish, it was easy for me to think of times when others had expressed homophobic and anti-Semitic jokes and sentiments to me. I had worked with clients who called me a "fag" and with others who threw pennies at me to see if I would pick them up. It was much easier to reflect on others' expressions of bigotry than my own. It was embarrassing to think of

myself as prejudiced and even more embarrassing to have to admit my prejudices to professional colleagues. I knew that I wanted to discuss the concept of emotional intelligence in my workshop, including the importance of not only being aware of one's own emotional responses, but also being able to regulate them (Bariso, 2018; Goleman, 2006). Again, applying what I wanted to share with others, I thought about how to manage my own embarrassment. I thought, if I can be brave about sharing my own RRB, perhaps others will do the same. If we all admit we're a little bit racist, then it is easier for us to discuss these issues openly.

Thinking more deeply about my own RRB beliefs, I reflected on what it meant to grow up in a small city in the Canadian prairies, raised in a Jewish home. I began to realize some of the stereotypes I developed from this context. For instance, our city was comprised primarily of people of European descent. The largest minority was comprised of people of First Nations (Native Canadian) descent. We had a professional football team that included many African Americans. I loved that our football team included players of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Because my experience with African Americans was limited, however, one of my pervasive beliefs about African Americans was that they were great athletes. While this may seem like a positive belief system, it is a stereotype with demeaning and insulting connotations—no ethnocultural group's worth should be wrapped up in a single trait.

My beliefs about First Nations peoples were also skewed, but in this situation they were skewed by the "cowboy and Indian" movies that I enjoyed as a child. I had classmates who were First Nations; however, I was essentially color blind to them, unaware of their rich culture, heritage, and value systems. I remember sharing jokes about "squaws" and "injuns, " oblivious to how these jokes could be hurtful. In terms of religious education, I attended a Hebrew school that taught me about the persecution that Jews had experienced throughout the ages—from Biblical times, to the Spanish Inquisition, to the Holocaust, and to modern times with terrorist attacks against Israel and Jews in many countries. Although it is important to be aware of this history of persecution, this education also facilitated stereotypes about Germans, Muslims, and Arabs. I remember as a teen walking through a Muslim neighborhood of Jerusalem feeling afraid. At the same time, I was unaware of how my fear and body language could be perceived by the people living in that community.

As a professional social worker, I have had to confront my prejudices on a number of occasions. When working with street youth, some of my clients self-identified as neo-Nazi skinheads. They were not hesitant to share their views on White, Christian, and heterosexual superiority with me. My job was to help them with alcohol and drug-related problems, not to challenge their beliefs or reform their ideologies. I strived to show them respect, empathy, and authenticity, which are Rogers' (1957) core conditions for effective therapeutic relationships. I struggled with respect, sensing that they did not respect me. I struggled with empathy, finding it difficult to understand the sources of their sense of superiority and hatred of others. I struggled with authenticity, downplaying anything that focused on my gay or Jewish identity and trying to avoid discussions of topics that could turn ugly. If I was going to be helpful to these clients, I needed to come to terms with my own insecurities and stereotypes about skinheads. At the time, sharing concerns with my clinical supervisor and colleagues was particularly helpful; doing so gave me a chance to vent, reflect, and recompose myself. Similarly, reflecting on my own biases, prejudices, and

examples of microaggressions helped me prepare for my workshop on engaging clients in discussions about RRB.

Conducting the Workshop

I started the field instructors' workshop by sharing narratives of my own stereotypes and microaggressions—occasions when I may have insulted or hurt others without intending to do so (Husain & Howard, 2017; Cruz, Rodriguez, & Mastropaolo, 2019). I could sense discomfort in the room—my own as well as that of the workshop participants. There were some awkward silences, and I received some suspicious looks. I imagined participants saying to themselves, "Who is this racist and how does he think he can teach us about responding effectively to clients expressing bigotry?" One of the key themes of the presentation was that in order to engage people in meaningful discussions about RRB, we had to be willing to engage in courageous conversations. Having a courageous conversation meant engaging with people even when there are risks of embarrassment, suspicion, and awkwardness. I told myself that it was okay that this workshop was not going as smoothly or as eloquently as I might have expected for other workshops that I have facilitated.

After sharing some of my own experiences of expressing RRB, I opened the discussion about hot-button issues—topics that are difficult to discuss because people may have deep-seated opinions and may respond with strong emotions. When we discussed the Black Lives Matter movement, for instance, some participants shared views that this moniker was a useful way to raise awareness of the violence and discrimination that Black individuals and communities have experienced at the hands of police (Banks, 2018). Others strongly disagreed. They thought the name Black Lives Matter sounded exclusive, putting off people (particularly Whites and police) rather than engaging them in constructive conversations. Still, others expressed differing views about the concept of Black identity and whether we should be using terms such as African American or People of Color instead. Some participants suggested that terms such as Black or People of Color could be interpreted as insults or microaggressions. The conversation continued to be awkward. Still, participants seemed to feel relatively free to express conflicting opinions.

I presented the discussion as a learning conversation rather than a problem-solving process or a debate. When people are confronted with controversial issues, they often want to convince others about the correct way to resolve the issues. This approach leads to an adversarial debate of whose position is better (Barsky, 2017). In a problem-solving approach, everyone works together to analyze the problem, identify options, and work toward a solution that meets everyone's needs and concerns (Barsky, 2017). For our conversation about RRB issues, I explained that we were not trying to build consensus or win an argument, but rather to listen to one another. Listening means giving everyone an opportunity to be heard. Listening also means giving everyone an opportunity to clarify the meaning of what others are saying and to demonstrate what they are understanding about one another's views.

Having a learning discussion does not mean having a discussion devoid of passion and emotion. The tone of the discussion changed many times throughout the discussion. At times, participants were polite and inquisitive, asked questions for clarification, and built on points that I was

making. When engaging in conversations about Black Lives Matter and the use of terms such as People of Color, some participants raised their voices, expressing frustration or anger. Overall, these expressions of emotion demonstrated that people felt very strongly about the issues. It seemed as if participants did not interpret heated discussions as personal attacks on themselves or their views. One of the key learnings expressed by participants was that it was easier to engage in conversations about controversial issues when there was no expectation that everyone had to agree. Having full and frank conversations might even result in some people feeling insulted. We were fostering a *courageous place to talk* rather than a *safe place to talk*.

The discussion allowed participants to see how language that they thought was respectful could be viewed as discriminatory or demeaning by others. People who identify with Black Lives Matter may react strongly when others try to reframe their moniker. When advocates for the safety of police use rhetoric such as Blue Lives Matter, proponents of Black Lives Matter may perceive them as racist. Both sides feel they have good intent, yet both sides feel slighted by the other. By understanding the differences between intent and how their messages are perceived, each group learns about the other's motivations and sensitivities. They may not agree with each other's choice of language, but at least they foster mutual empathy.

Engaging in constructive RRB conversations does not require us to call others racist or attack them for the slights we may perceive. Rather, we can approach others with courage and humility. We can use strategies designed to open discussion without putting others on the defensive. For instance, we can ask clarifying questions to learn about the other person's intent. We can let others know that even though they had good intentions, we may have felt hurt or insulted. We can use humor to diffuse tension. And we can work together to identify common values and areas of agreement rather than focusing only on differences (Goodman, 2011).

Further Research

The experience of conducting a workshop on RRB conversations and reflecting upon it in this paper raises additional questions about the notion of cultural humility and how it can be applied in the context of facilitating courageous conversations. What are the core elements to cultural humility? What specific role does awareness of one's own biases play in being able to respond to clients and others who express RRB? Future research could further explore the ways that cultural humility may be taught and integrated into educational workshops on RRB conversations. In addition to having didactic discussions and engaging in courageous conversations, for instance, it may be useful to explore the use of roleplays, videos, and reflective journals. It would also be useful to explore the use of similar workshops for educators, mental health professionals, and other human service practitioners.

Conclusion

When social workers and other helping professionals work with clients, it is important to show unconditional positive regard. When working with clients who are expressing views that the professionals perceive as racist or bigoted, it is important to note that respect for the person does not mean agreeing with their beliefs, values, or worldviews. Rather, it means striving for

understanding from the other person's perspective. Incorporating the concept of cultural humility in practice helps professionals develop understanding from the client's perspective.

Professionals can then use this understanding to demonstrate empathy, build trust, and engage in constructive conversations with their clients. Accepting that "we're all a little bit racist" can help us approach clients with the cultural humility required to be open to hearing their beliefs, values, and worldviews, regardless of whether we agree with them.

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