Cultural Humility:
My Journey from Personal Experience to Classroom Teaching

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Abstract: This paper begins with my cultural journey as a Puerto Rican woman and the experiences I sought in learning from others about their cultural perspectives. Now, as an educator, I discuss and illustrate my efforts to teach social work students the skills of applying cultural humility principles to their practice with clients and the value of curiosity and self-reflection.

***Keywords*:** cultural humility, curiosity, stereotypes, self-reflection, teaching

As a social work educator of Puerto Rican descent, I was drawn to the concept of cultural humility. Both my life and professional experiences have led me to embrace a perspective that focuses on self-reflection and curiosity. I reflected on understanding my own cultural identity journey and learning about the diverse cultural backgrounds from those I have met along the way.

When I began my graduate studies and career in social work, the lens of culture and diversity and its impact on understanding human behavior and practice differed considerably from its current place in our profession's history. Attending graduate school in the late 1970s, I was part of a very small cohort of Latino students. At that time, the classes and the literature devoted minimal attention to the subject of cultural diversity. When referenced, certain cultural behaviors and values were "pathologized." Needless to say, it was difficult and disturbing for me. Current social work teaching and practice have evolved, as have associated disciplines, to underscore the impact of this important factor in our lives, in the lives of our clients, and the work we do.

I am the eldest daughter of Puerto Rican parents. My mother immigrated to the mainland at the age of sixteen. She came alone, and after residing here for a couple of years, she met my father, a first-generation Puerto Rican. From birth, I lived in close proximity to my grandparents and other family members in the Bronx. We lived in a low income, multi-ethnic neighborhood. Although I grew up recognizing that my family grappled with significant financial limitations, I also recognized that I had a rich and supportive family network.

Growing up, I was keenly aware of the different backgrounds of the many families I encountered as I navigated through the NYC public school system. They spoke different languages, ate different foods, and celebrated or marked events differently. Early on, I was fascinated by these differences. I was excited to learn about how "others" differed from me. I also grew to recognize the ways in which we were similar. As I learned to understand these cultural variations, I grew in my appreciation and understanding of my own cultural background. I greatly value how I have grown through my interactions with people from other cultures. I have not only learned about the viewpoints and traditions of others; I have also been able to enrich my own life by drawing from some of these traditions. Food, for example, is such an important expression of culture. My Thanksgiving table does not only offer turkey with all the fixings but also *arroz con gandules*,

empanadas, and noodle *kugel*, a dish traditionally made at Jewish family gatherings.

I have also experienced prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping. At times, I have been hurtfully subjected to these realities. It was not the experiences with strangers that constituted the most painful encounters, but rather interactions with colleagues and friends. It troubled me that people would inquire, "Are you a citizen of the United States?" I needed to remind them that all Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States. Sometimes people commented on my fluency and command of the English language with remarks such as "My, you speak English so well." Sometimes, well-intended, seemingly informed individuals would make broad generalizations about my religious background, food preferences, lifestyle, and even temperament based on something they had learned through the media or presentations about Puerto Rican culture. Once at a meeting, when I conveyed my upset regarding a particular action taken, the chair framed my reaction as understandable given my "Latin temperament." The cumulative impact of these misrepresentations and microaggressions left me feeling misunderstood and frustrated. These perceptions did not take into account individual differences based on a myriad of factors including life and educational experiences as well as differing levels of acculturation. Additionally, there was little inquiry or curiosity about my experience of my culture—just assumptions that were sometimes insensitive, incorrect, and distancing.

Despite these painful encounters, I was also aware of how others opened their hearts and lives to me. I continued to be very curious—wanting to understand where others came from, how they viewed and experienced the world. This curiosity led to a mutual and respectful exchange that invited me to more openly speak of my unique experiences and the influences within my culture. It was an exchange that promoted genuine understanding, not stereotypical assumptions. This inquisitiveness led to my ability to explore more deeply and honestly within myself. As a social work practitioner and educator, I was able to strengthen my capacity to explore culture and its implications for work with others. The more I was able to deepen my inward journey, to reflect on my perceptions and consider my stereotypes of others, the more I was able to grow in my engagement of clients and to connect with them in a very different and honest manner. For this reason, the notion of cultural humility resonates so deeply for me and I have sought to incorporate it in my teaching.

Not until 1992 did the Council on Social Work Education mandate the inclusion of diversity content in the curricula of accredited social work programs (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997). In the past two decades, there has been a growing emphasis on the development of the frameworks for cultural competence, and subsequently cultural humility. I was excited to see that the perspectives of culture and cultural differences were becoming a major area of focus. For so long, culture, as an area for learning, seemed to have been "in the closet." Finally, recognition was afforded to culture as a critical and important slice of the biopsychosocial and ecological perspectives.

We need to learn from what has been researched about the cultures of the people we serve. Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) indicate "that there be a simultaneous process of self-reflection (realistic and ongoing self-appraisal) and commitment to a lifelong learning process" (p. 119). Through this process, students and practitioners can remain open and able to

let go of the "false sense of security that stereotyping brings . . . and to assess anew the cultural dimensions of the experiences" of each person (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998, p. 118). Concurrently, we need to acknowledge what we do not know and how to seek out new learning and awareness that would enhance both our understanding and the quality of the services we provide.

Recognizing that culture is something we each experience in a deeply personal, individual and intimate manner, cultural humility invites us to put aside all preconceived ideas and generalizations about the culture of the person in front of us. We can then step in to learn about people's cultural experience directly from them, listening to their personal experience and their unique relationship to their heritage and culture.

My interest in how culture shapes people permeated my work as a practitioner, a field instructor, and now as classroom educator. In teaching both BSW and MSW students, I have incorporated the concepts inherent in cultural humility into course content. The teaching challenge has been how to help students understand a concept, to experience it, and then to own it. Dewey (1902) postulated that meaningful learning takes place when the "abstract world" of concepts is connected to the "real world" of personal experiences. As a teacher, I see my role as crafting opportunities for students to make their own discoveries and to find the meanings these have for them. Using these precepts, and drawing from my personal experiences, I will present illustrations from two classes, one in practice and the other in human behavior and the social environment, to reflect on my efforts to engage students in learning about cultural humility.

I asked a diverse class of graduate students to submit a vignette from a process record in which they "felt stuck" and did not know how to help a client with a culturally related issue. A social work intern, "Mark," presented the following vignette from his work with a fifteen-year-old Latino boy, "Edwin," in a public-school setting. Mark had been working with Edwin for a couple of months. Mark wrote:

> At the start of our session, Edwin began to speak rapidly about an incident that recently occurred. He said that he had smacked a female at school who called him a "spic." I inquired, "Have you ever hit a female before?" He responded, "No." I asked if they have a history, and he replied, "[F]or [three or four] years she has called me a spic. She is White and I know she comes from a prejudiced family. I guess I just had it with her." He said, "I couldn't believe that I hit her. It was like I was watching my hands come up and smack her. Afterwards I felt badly and couldn't understand why I did that." Edwin stated that everything was okay now and that they had "squashed the situation." I pointed out to Edwin that these incidents seem to be occurring more often. He responded, "My fuse is shorter." I reflected, "Your fuse became shorter?" His voice grew stronger[:] "I am tired of being put down and called names." [I told him,] "I know it's hard, but you also have to take care of yourself so you don't get into trouble. You have to decide what path you want to go down. Right now the path you're heading on could be destructive for you eventually. I don't think you've gone too far down that path and if you want, you can pull back and change it." Edwin nodded his head and responded that he sees that, and he doesn't want to fit the stereotype of young Puerto Rican males who end up in jail. Edwin

> added, "I want people to know my name. I want to get out of this neighborhood and do something."

As I reviewed the record, I sensed that Mark wanted to be helpful to Edwin, giving him a sense of hope, wanting to challenge him to set positive goals for himself and refrain from the kind of behavior that would get him into difficulty. However, I could also see where Mark felt stuck, not knowing how to respond to Edwin's anger at being called this contemptuous term for people of Latino origin. One of the principles of cultural humility is the importance of connecting to the experience and perceptions of others. It requires being open to learn from them. In this process, the client becomes "our teacher."

In using this vignette in a classroom exercise, I wanted to help the students see and experience how not listening and not responding to difficult content can lead to moving away from or avoiding issues that are vital at that moment. I was also aware that sometimes students could become uncomfortable when exposed to anger or even worldviews that are different from their own.

I began by asking Mark how he experienced the interchanges in the vignette he presented. He responded that he did not know how to respond to Edwin. "I thought that I needed to address Edwin's loss of control and his slapping the other student." Mark discussed the pressure he felt to work to curtail the student's aggressive behavior, as it was a major focus of the teacher and administrators of the school. He said he knew the term "spic" was very offensive but really did not know how to address it.

I moved to exploring with the other class members how they might have felt when Edwin said, "I slapped her because she called me a 'spic.' She's been calling me that for [three or four] years. She is White and I know she comes from a prejudiced family. I guess I just have had it with her."

"Isabel"— a Latina student in the class—responded, "I would feel angry to be referred to by such an ethnically demeaning term." I asked her what the term meant for her. She said this word embodied many stereotypes about Latinos and projected anger. She added that it was a very hurtful word. The silence in the room and the look on the other students' faces clearly conveyed that this was a powerful moment.

I began by asking Mark, "How were you feeling when Edwin told you a girl called him a 'spic'?" I asked him to try to go back to that moment. He said he was struggling with his own anger at the girl and was fearful it might seep out. He said that he even understood Edwin's impulse to lash back and slap the girl. Interchangeably, I also asked the class "If you were in Mark's shoes, what might it have been like for you?" Some responded that they would be afraid to explore Edwin's anger as they worried they would not know how to respond to his volatility. Others struggled with how they might be perceived by Edwin, especially if they were not a person of color. One student, notably upset, stated that he doubted that "the system" would ever be helpful to kids like Edwin and that these oppressive realities would never change. Some struggled with Edwin's pain and just wanted to make his sadness "go away." They offered

examples of responses, which were either intellectualizing the problem or prematurely reassuring Edwin that he could change the direction in which he was heading. However, what actually occurred was that little curiosity was demonstrated, and the exploration of Edwin's message and feelings did not take place.

After exploring Mark's feelings and those of his classmates, I moved to deepen the students' understanding of Edwin's experience. I asked the class to try to "get into Edwin's shoes" and to consider what it might have meant to Edwin to be called a "spic." We then returned back to the process record to re-examine what had actually taken place. To help them identify with Edwin's experience, I asked them to state their reactions from the "I" position. "I felt . . ." This would enable the students in the class to experience Edwin's feelings in a deeper, more authentic way. Students offered different reactions such as "I was furious," "Who does that bitch think she is," "It is hard to tell Mark what happened. Will he understand or even care? He is just another White person." After a brief pause, a student poignantly stated, "I feel so much pain," an emotion I tried to help the class explore.

I followed up by asking the students how Edwin might have experienced Mark's reactions and to step back into his shoes again. As Edwin, they responded, "I know that Mark meant well, but I don't think he really wants to listen. He makes it sound so easy to just ignore somebody when they insult you."

This exercise and discussion helped facilitate the students' understanding of how difficult and painful content is often avoided and how this avoidance "shuts down" the helping process. This avoidance is not rooted in the client's lack of desire to share; it is rooted in the worker's reluctance to be curious, to become the "learner" and to enter the client's experience. By using this exercise, I wanted to model how this difficult content could be explored. This teaching exercise fosters a basic principle in cultural humility; namely, that it is the client rather than the worker who possesses the expertise of their experience. It is the worker who needs to put aside assumptions and respectfully enter and inquire about the client's experience in order to facilitate mutuality and a non-paternalistic, working relationship.

Another basic principle, relevant to cultural humility, is the importance of understanding our biases and our stereotypes. We must take the "journey inward" to better grasp where we sit with these notions, as well as take the "journey outward" to better understand how culture has influenced those with whom we work. Often, as well intended as we may be, mistakes are made when we assume that the experiences and perceptions of one person can be generalized to others. These assumptions may lead to confusing and hurtful experiences, impeding our understanding and ability to be helpful.

My second illustration is drawn from teaching a social work course in human behavior and the social environment. We were covering the biopsychosocial perspective in social work and were focusing on the influence of culture on human development. Rather than "telling" students about the ways culture impacts development, I structured an opportunity for students to consider how an aspect of their cultural experience, tradition, or values has influenced them. I divided the class into dyads. I asked them to attentively listen to their partner and to only ask clarifying questions

to better understand the impact of culture in each other's lives. Finally, I also added that in sharing with their partners some might feel comfortable while others may feel some level of discomfort. Students were instructed to try and enter this experience without judgment, to avoid giving positive or negative feedback but rather to simply be curious, seeking to understand the experiences of their partners. After a period of discussion, they were asked to reverse the process so that each could experience being the one who shared as well as the one who listened. Finally, I told the class that after a period of dyadic discussions they would be invited to open up to the larger group.

The classroom was initially quiet, but soon active dyadic conversations unfolded. I could hear them speaking of family connections, traditions, and issues related to cultural expectations. Following the interchanges between the various dyads, I asked students, as the larger group, to discuss how they experienced telling their story as well as how they experienced hearing their partner's story. One woman, "Sara," stated that she grew up in an Irish and Jewish home. She stated that, over the years, it was difficult for her to integrate her cultural experience because she grew up in two distinct worlds. She explained that it was hard to navigate between very different traditions and religious practices. She then offered that because her cultural experience was at times made up of two conflicting experiences, she was initially confused about how she wanted to respond to the question posed. Her partner, "David," stated that, as someone who grew up in what he described as a more traditional, culturally Jewish home, this difference in their backgrounds led him to be curious—to want to inquire to better understand. Although he could sense that this situation was not an easy one for Sara, he found her background very interesting. He said that he wondered whether she had a stronger identification with one culture more than the other and how her family chose to create balance with the celebration of holidays and expression of faith. Sara and David shared a bit more with the class and before moving on to hear from others in the class, I highlighted that this was an example of the use of curiosity. Sara posed the struggle and David used curiosity to learn more about her experience.

As the discussion continued with the larger group, other themes emerged. Students spoke about stereotypes and how different messages about cultural groups influenced their perceptions. For example, a couple of students, "Carlos" and "Ana"—whose families were more recent Central and Latin American immigrants—talked about the discrepancy between their perceptions of their family values and how they felt the society at large viewed them. Carlos, whose family was from Central America, stated that he grew up with the values of working hard, being goal-directed, and being achievement-oriented. He stated that his achievements were important to him and would not only belong to him but would belong to his family as well. This was important to him since he was born in the United States and would probably be able to achieve something that his parents, who were not documented, may never be given the opportunity to achieve. They were hardworking but lived with the uncertainty of their status. He then discussed how he struggled with the stereotypes of Latino immigrants who were portrayed as lazy, "wanting to take advantage" while offering nothing to this country.

As I surveyed the class, I knew that other students were affected by the passionate manner in which he spoke about the discrepancy between how he viewed himself and how others might see him and his family. I stated to the class that others might also be sitting with feelings of

identification as they considered some of these statements as they, too, may have experienced the sting of stereotypes.

"Fatima"—who was from a Middle Eastern background—discussed her love of her culture, its rich history, and its values of family, hospitality, and education. She gave examples of ways she experienced her culture as different from the American culture she had encountered. In her conversation with her partner, she spoke of her use of the veil and what it meant to her. Although she knew that in the "post-9/11 world" the veil evoked different ideas and feelings in people, it was something special for her. She shared that she wore it to honor and to be obedient to her culture and faith. Her partner, another woman, shared that while she respected Fatima's decision to wear the veil, she had her own ideas rooted in, as she stated, more "feminist ideas" of gender equality and women's roles that made it hard for her to hear Fatima's perceptions without hearing a different voice of judgment "in her head." She stated that she struggled to listen as she, at various points in their exchange, wanted to try to sway Fatima to consider a different perspective on her role as a woman.

As the discussion evolved, I underscored the importance of listening in the context of cultural humility. As this was a beginning social work class, I introduced the concept of self-reflection as an essential social work skill. I explained that, in listening to others, we need to listen to our own reactions, our feelings, and our judgments. By getting in touch with our assumptions and perceptions, we can begin to examine how these may facilitate, but also negatively impact, our practice efforts.

Each time I use this simple exercise, I am impressed with the rich discussions that emerge. The examples of listening and learning are what cultural humility is all about. These are powerful discourses where, inevitably, students learn a great deal—about others and themselves. These dyadic interactions were important in not only questioning and possibly breaking through stereotypes but also in offering the opportunity for new learning. Students experienced the value of curiosity. This process can be transformational and can teach us how to enter the helping process with genuine interest by unearthing perceptions that we carry and are carried by others.

Conclusion

In my professional lifetime, the complexities of culture and its impact have moved from a seemingly less important and unexplored area to a reality that is present in almost every daily headline. Given our current economic, political, and social climate, it is imperative that the helping professions challenge our colleagues, students, and ourselves to learn about culture. We need to learn from what is observed and researched but also from what we can learn directly from members of the diverse cultures with whom we interact.

As practitioners, classroom teachers, and field instructors, we need to seek ways to instill and cultivate the thirst for a lifelong process of curiosity and learning about culture—our own culture as well as the cultures of those around us. This process makes us all "learners" as well as "teachers." The concept and, more importantly, the practice of cultural humility provide us with important tools which help us to approach others with a genuine openness to learn from their

viewpoints and the lives they have lived.

References

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