Cultural Humility: A Life-Long Transformation

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Abstract: For years, I subscribed to the concept of cultural competence. I believed I needed to acquire as much knowledge as I could about cultures through textbooks and workshops. However, as I continued to work in the field, I started to realize the knowledge I gained did not relate to a specific cultural group, but to an individual experience. Although we learned to seek information from individuals to make an accurate assessment, I still held some beliefs that I later learned were viewed as stereotypes and/or generalizations. I then stumbled across cultural humility, thus changing my mindset on how I approached life and people in general.

Keywords**:** cultural humility, cultural competency

Cultural competence is a well-known phenomenon in many professions over a number of years. With a variety of names and meanings, cultural competence has strong connections to how people see the world and treat others. Cultural competence, or multicultural education, is taught in various professions and educational settings, such as “teacher education programs, nurse educator programs, social work student programs, school counselor programs, and even in financial planning” (Moore-Bembry, 2018, p. 18). The definition of cultural competency is focused on one acquiring a set of beliefs, knowledge, and skills that are necessary for working with diverse groups or individuals (Kirmayer, 2012; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2015). Over the years, the definition of cultural competence has changed, and it can vary based on the profession. Williams (2007) defined cultural competency as behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable effective cross-cultural work. NASW (2015) defined cultural competency as a process where individuals respectfully and effectively respond to people of all “cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration statuses, and other diversity factors” (p. 13).

By definition, cultural competence implies social workers possess the knowledge, skills, and beliefs to work with various populations. Yes, social work students can and do learn the knowledge and skills necessary to work with others. However, it comes at a price—the lack of understanding how one’s culture, values, and beliefs influence *how* they work with others (Nadan & Ben-Ari, 2013). Therefore, the question becomes this: How do social work students learn this information? At what point in social work education are social work students educated on self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-regulation? When do social work educators and practitioners have the opportunity to learn and practice self-awareness and self-regulation? Cultural competency is a lifelong process, but it must begin in the education of the future social worker. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) mandates that all social work programs provide students the opportunity to “engage diversity and difference in practice” (p. 7). How do programs meet this requirement? My social work education provided a diversity course in graduate school, and each week we reviewed information on a specific ethnic group. We did not focus on self-awareness; we simply had a lecture or group presentation on the ethnicity scheduled for that week.

I began researching social work program course listings and syllabi and discovered that students are still required to complete a course in diversity. I conducted a cursory review of course syllabi from several social work programs and found the diversity courses offer a high-level overview of various ethnicities in the format similar to what I experienced and commonly referred to as "ethnicity of the week." Each week, students are tasked with reviewing either textbook chapters or journal articles about the ethnicity; some are assigned group presentations to report on knowledge learned while others are given a class lecture on the information. These courses do not necessarily stress the need to self-assess—in fact, some of the information that is presented may be viewed as stereotypes or generalizations of individuals in the given ethnic groups.

The "Aha" Moment

Over the years, I always subscribed to the concept and tenets of cultural competency. I believed I needed to learn about other cultures in order to become an effective social work practitioner and educator. However, as I continued to review cultural competency, I started to realize that cultural competency was an abstract concept that often denoted a finality. This finality is often based on the acquisition of textbook knowledge to learn about another culture to better serve a client or population. In my undergraduate and graduate coursework, I "learned" some specifics about a certain cultural/racial ethnicity that were often repeated and used in practice. As I progressed in my education and professional practice, I began to realize that these specifics could be classified as stereotypes and generalizations of a group and did not really reflect the individual nature of my clients and/or their families. I also realized that my own personal values and beliefs possibly hindered the work I was able to do with clients. This "aha" moment led me to begin to seek out a better understanding of what I needed to know and learn to become an effective culturally competent social work practitioner.

Some of the beliefs and values that were instilled in me through culture, life experience, religion, education, and society certainly were not in line with social work values and, unfortunately, I did not spend time nor was I encouraged to spend time reflecting on my own beliefs. I grew up in a home with parents who were baby boomers that encountered various experiences that impacted the civil rights of Black Americans as children and adults. Both of my parents came from the Midwest, where many might believe that racism was not as much an issue as in the South, but my parents experienced it daily growing up and shared those stories with us. My father chose to join the military to remove himself from the poverty and racism of his hometown of St. Louis. In fact, he volunteered to go to Vietnam just to escape. I lost two uncles, who were killed on the same corner less than a block from home. One was ten years old when the White owner of the bakery on that corner shot him in the head and alleged that he had broken into the store. When authorities arrived, the only story they heard was that of the owner, and no charges were filed in my uncle's death. Ten years later, another uncle was killed on the same corner (within 100 feet of his brother's death) in a drive-by. My mother grew up in a suburb of Detroit and was front and center during the riots nicknamed the "Long, Hot Summer of 1967." At the time, my dad was stationed at a nearby Air Force base in Michigan and could vividly remember seeing the city of Detroit burn. Hearing my parents tell their own accounts of what they were doing and how they felt when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated as well as other prominent Black figures further drove my desire to read and learn more about the Black experience in America.

I was a military brat growing up, and it was ingrained in us to accept everyone; in essence, we were one big family living on the military installation. As brats we are all just people; sure, there was the occasional issue, but we were extremely sheltered. We were always educated on the military institution with the exception of two duty stations. My experiences in high school when I returned to the US from Germany began to shape some of my beliefs about other populations and races. I moved to a military base where children were educated off base for middle school and high school. I encountered large amounts of racism within the school system not only from students but also from faculty and staff. Most of the children from minoritized populations were from the military installation, and it was not uncommon for us to be called n**** in school without consequences for those who chose to use those words. There were times when we experienced lapses in judgment and retaliated and were immediately disciplined and removed from the school while the offenders were protected and coddled by the district. My White guidance counselor told me I would never make it in a four-year institution and regularly told me I needed to apply to a community college and look for a job. Those of us from minoritized populations bonded together and, no matter what, protected one another. Of course, we had the usual high school drama with one another, but our bond was never broken. These experiences with White students and administrators in the school district as well as my cultural and familial experiences led me to become distrustful of White people.

This distrust grew as I entered college at a predominantly White institution. I often felt the undertones of institutionalized racism in various situations, from professors who would deduct points from assignments and, when asked for an explanation, would deem me aggressive or refuse to respond to campus police questioning Black students and assuming the worst if we were out on campus. Could that be a result of racism, or a lack of empathy or experience working with students from minoritized populations? It is hard to say, so in most instances I just shrugged it off, saying, "This is just the way it is," since I had experienced it on multiple occasions in various settings.

In one undergraduate course, we were told that Black people are dying at a young age due to their lack of health insurance and high unemployment. This was a class where I was the one of three Black students out of about forty students. I am sure you could imagine how low I sunk in my chair. Coincidentally or not, none of us spoke up although all of us had health insurance, were healthy, and worked just as our parents did. In my studies, I started to unknowingly subscribe to stereotypes and generalizations of others based on textbooks and lectures. I vividly remember sitting in courses in my undergraduate studies and later trainings at work and walking away repeating things such as: "When working with Asian populations, do not look them in the eyes as that is considered a sign of disrespect," and "When engaging a Latino family, only speak to the male due to Machismo." Another stereotype that was frequently stated was the aggressiveness of and mistrust by African/Black Americans.

As Christians, I and my childhood churchmates were frequently taught about the sins in the Bible. These sins extended eternal damnation to swaths of people, from those who committed sins as small as a lie up to those who committed murder. A couple of the areas that were discussed more than others were homosexuality and abortion (as they are listed in the Bible). We heard about them from the time I was a child, and they were always viewed negatively; it was

often said that we were not to keep company with those whose identity or sexual preference or belief in abortion differed from what was written. I toiled with this, as I knew I had friends who identified as lesbian or gay and I also knew people who had abortions. I could not see myself telling someone I could not talk to them because of their sexual orientation or right to choose. In fact, some of my favorite professors identified as lesbian and close friends had aborted children.

Fast forward some years where, in many instances, when Black people were mentioned in the news, it was negative press. The multitude of police shootings, the political climate, and the social climate in the US further added to the mistrust. At this point, as I was well into my career, I wondered how I could work with clients, students, and other people if I have a great deal of mistrust. I often questioned if I was in the right field.

You see, I was stuck in this paradox: How could I call myself a social worker and believe these things about others? How could I call myself a Christian and ostracize others? This is where I had to step back and challenge my values and beliefs. As I was reading DeMoss (2005), I began to conduct a self-assessment and realized it was pride, it was a heart issue, and it was mine! I had internalized a lot of racism, oppression, and discrimination, and it had forced me to put up a wall based on identity, race, religion, and experience. From that point on, I knew this wall must be deconstructed.

Introduction to Cultural Humility

One year while I was teaching an undergraduate social work field course, the assigned readings by Hook (2014) and Hook et al. (2013) gave me a glimpse into the concept of cultural humility. After I read the articles, I was so excited I felt like I had struck gold!! The articles reinforced my argument that cultural competence could not be achieved the way it was written without engaging in self-reflection. I was excited and thought this was the answer to my burning questions and that I needed to share this information with my students. I read the articles several times and when the time came to discuss them in class, I did what any great educator would do... I skipped over them and focused on content that brought less discomfort. I was at a loss for words and was not sure how to introduce this article to a class of students where I was the only person in the racial minority. I was in the beginning stages of understanding my racial identity development, and I was not ready to share that with the masses.

My Journey

After that experience, I recognized I needed to do more work in this area, starting with increasing my knowledge in my racial identity development and the concept of cultural humility. In essence, I became a disciple of cultural humility; I used every opportunity to research and read about the concept. Hook (2014) asserted that cultural humility includes two components: intrapersonal and interpersonal. The intrapersonal component requires one to become "aware of their own cultural worldviews, biases, and blind spots" Hook, 2014, p. 279), meaning to develop an accurate view of self (see also Hook et al., 2013). The interpersonal component necessitates that one should respect others and possess a lack of superiority; the individual should be consistently "placing themselves in situations that stretch them to engage with individuals who

are culturally different from them" (Hook, 2014, p. 279; see also Hook et al., 2013). As I began this journey, I focused on assessing my own cultural worldview. I realized that my worldview was shaped by my culture, lived experiences, and religious beliefs. This realization led me to recognize that my values and beliefs impacted the way I treated others. I held others to a higher standard than I held myself; I believed that others needed to make changes in their lives based on my cultural worldview and standard. These beliefs were rooted in the notion of acknowledging differences in others as opposed to noting our similarities. I created a new standard of bias for the clients I provided services based on my cultural and societal view and it negatively impacted those who did not measure up to my bar. I had to stop thinking about what I would do or what society believed should be done in various situations and look at how most of my clients were doing the best they could with the resources that they had. These thoughts aided in my transformation, a new way of life towards cultural humility with further development of "openness, self-awareness, agelessness, self-reflection, and supportive interactions" (Rosen et al., 2017, p. 291).

Another area that had to be tackled was my religious indoctrination. For many years, we were told not to interact with those who lie, steal, murder, commit fornication/adultery or practice homosexuality, and so on. I just could not understand how we could show the love of God to others if we decided to stay away. I often heard people say love the person but hate the sin—I started questioning: How can you separate the two? Unfortunately, we all sin, so in essence we are saying we should not even commune with ourselves because we are all sinners. I started reading the scripture for a better understanding as opposed to what I heard from others. I saw for myself that Christ did not turn anyone away, so who am I to do the same? I began to challenge my family members on this belief. Who are we to judge others? Who are we to dictate to others what they can and cannot do with their bodies? I started speaking out; it did not always work well. In fact, many conversations went awry because I stuck to my beliefs while others held closely to theirs—yet, I still spoke up. In a presentation at a local hospital, I was approached by several chaplains who wanted to further discuss my assertions of loving everyone as Christ did. One chaplain thanked me and said she really needed to hear that. I often say our job is to love everyone and I strongly believe love is stronger than hate. This statement was further illuminated when I recently came across something similar on Facebook: "I have zero desire to condemn and 100% desire to show love" (Moore, 2019). These areas were tough but really forced me to examine an anonymous quote I often said in trainings: "How I see you is how I am with you."

The Test of Newfound Knowledge

Just as I try clothes on in a dressing room, I began to try on the concept of cultural humility. I shared my new knowledge with anyone who would listen; most times it was my family who became subject to my cultural humility soliloquies. I stressed the need to reflect in action and on action. I began to write about the necessity of social work educators and students to reflect and adopt cultural humility. I frequently referred to the concept in my trainings and teachings. I became a cultural humility salesperson!

When I began my doctoral studies, I was unsure of what I wanted to conduct my dissertation on. Of course, some of my earlier papers revolved around cultural humility, but I would lose interest

in furthering the work and sometimes it was easier to write a paper about something less stressful and time consuming. However, when I returned to teach the field class, I had a new perspective. I was teaching at a predominantly White institution and I was eager to share my new knowledge with them. I was enthusiastic that I had applied the elements of critical self-reflection to my own values and beliefs and began to understand how they impacted how I viewed and worked with others. I implored my students to do the same; in fact, we spent the semester discussing culture and how it governs the way we see others. Initially my students disengaged when I mentioned race, racism, and oppression. When I brought the topic up, you could hear a pin drop in the room! Somehow, we began talking about Beyoncé and her Super Bowl halftime performance and that propelled us into the discussion, as I had a few students from the Beyhive. After they engaged in the topic, I cautiously confronted the fact that they were silent until the mention of Beyoncé. My students reported they were uncomfortable with the topic and never really had to talk about it in other classes or that they had opted not to participate in those types of discussions. When pressed further, they said it was seldom mentioned in class and they did not discuss it growing up, so it was an uncomfortable topic. The students also did not want to be labeled as racist by their peers. I had two Black students (one who identified as biracial) who took the opportunity to further engage in and expand the discussion. They began to mention how they always felt ostracized in the classroom because the classes lacked discussions about their culture or identity. They also stated they did not read books or articles by people from minoritized populations in class and it bothered them, but they never really had a space to share it. I was shocked—but actually, I was not. I went to the same university and had the same experience as them. This class discussion in particular led me to seek information on the work that social work educators were doing to foster their knowledge on this topic. I found a few studies that addressed social work students, but the results for social work educators were quite sparse. Thus, the birth of my dissertation!

Birth of a Dissertation

As I spent time reflecting on what I could investigate, all roads returned back to cultural humility. I felt strongly that we (people) could use a moment of self-reflection in order to increase our self-awareness and become better educators and social workers. I conducted a qualitative explanatory case study that explored ten White faculty members' racial identity development and how that development affected their cultural self-awareness and cultural humility in the classroom (Moore-Bembry, 2018). The faculty members who participated in this study profoundly reported cultural competence could not be achieved, as it denoted mastery or a false impression that one has arrived (Moore-Bembry, 2018). Some reported they found themselves shying away from material that related to race or racism or using a less direct approach, such as video or online question-and-answer programs to remove instructor vulnerability. The results of the research indicated that the concept of cultural humility is one that needs to be further explored within social work education. Faculty, staff, and students should be fully engaged in continuous self-reflection and self-awareness as well as continuing education and peer mentoring groups to assist with mastering the concept (Varghese, 2016). Students will follow the model (the educator); if the educator shies away from the material or discussion, so will the students.

Moving Forward

NASW (2015) and Edmonds-Cady and Wingfield (2017) report educators are responsible for promoting equity, equality, and challenging social injustice for oppressed and marginalized groups (Moore-Bembry, 2018). However, if the educator has "not adequately addressed their own issues of race, power, and privilege they will be ill-equipped to address these issues in the classroom" (Moore-Bembry, 2018, p. 98). When one is uncomfortable with the concepts and consciously or unconsciously omits the content, it is an injustice to social work education, the educator, the students, and the students' future clients. This omission leads students to a superficial understanding of the critical self-reflection needed to engage in anti-oppressive social work practice (Sue et al., 2016).

In my conference presentations, I spent time encouraging and challenging participants to engage in self-reflection. Social work conferences are often entitled calls to action, but when do we move past the call and begin to act? Where do we begin? By reflecting on our values and beliefs and how they impact and hinder our work with others. This must begin with the social work educators. Educators must be willing to reflect on their own racial identity development and the impact in order to effectively discuss race, racism, oppression, and discrimination in the classroom.

Social work education must provide clear competencies for social work institutions to engage in anti-racist and anti-oppressive work. Shields (2010) contends that if social workers want to challenge social injustice, we must be able to challenge "the inappropriate use of power and privilege that create[s] or perpetuate[s] inequality and injustice" (p. 564). We will not be able to do this without conducting a self-critique to understand what power and privilege we hold and how we impact others with it. Transformational leadership is "leadership in times of change" (Bass & Riggio, 2006 as cited in Tafvelin et al., 2014, p. 898), and it requires leaders to "challeng[e] inappropriate use of power and privilege…that create or perpetuate inequity and justice" (Shields, 2010, p. 564). Shields (2010) further asserts that transformative leadership requires one to shift their own values, attitudes, and behaviors; therefore, social worker educators must step into this role by taking responsibility for their actions and understanding how their actions or lack of action will impact students and their future clients (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). As transformational leaders, social work educators must seek to increase the consciousness and understanding to inspire social work students to shift their individualist interests towards the collective good (Moore-Bembry, 2018; Tafvelin et al., 2014). Consequently, this mindset requires an organizational and cultural shift that must begin with social work educators, then transfer into social work education.

I shared my journey; however, I want to stress that it is not complete. I am still a work in progress, and it is imperative that I engage in self-reflection daily. I cannot allow myself to fall into a false sense of security that I have it all together, as that would be a detriment to my clients and students. As I continue my journey, I implore social work educators to do the same.

> "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself."
> - Leo Tolstoy

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