

# Using a Lens of Cultural Humility to Dissolve Racialized Inequities for Families

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**Abstract:** With the advent of technology and social media, we are exposed to increasing amounts of overt acts of racism and hate. Though the overall impact of these occurrences is felt through the general population, it is particularly salient with human service professionals, social workers in particular. As is often the case, after egregious acts of racism have occurred, interventions and response-driven programming around cultural competency surface as a means to address ignorance and promote equality and equity. Calls go out for a curriculum strategy that not only educates from a theoretical and historic perspective, but that also demonstrates better practices for working with diverse client populations while supporting the understanding of complex issues rooted in the “-isms.” When this occurs, the focus on learning about “the other” can diminish or eliminate self-reflection. The purpose of this paper is to describe the creation of a training program rooted in the phenomena of cultural humility, the methodology of the program, measurement tools for process and outcome evaluation, and observational data about the reception of cultural humility among this group.

**Keywords:** cultural humility, child welfare, training, diversity

The profession of social work is set apart from other helping professions by its adherence to a person-in-environment model, a practice premise that compels one to consider the context of lived experience when working with clients. Within the frame of environment, culture requires an awareness of the collective as experienced by the individual. For years, schools of social work have embedded within their curriculum cultural competence as a means of ensuring students are prepared to serve as equipped contextual practitioners. This curricular focus reveals an issue deeper than the inherent limitations of asserting an impossible practice skill of understanding the exact cultural context of all clients served. Rather, it reflects the pervasive nature of implicit bias even when the explicit goal is equitable engagement. Yeager and Bauer-Wu (2013) assert that cultural competence, by its inherent focus on the other, regularly supports stereotyping, promoting the theory that holistic culture can actually be known. Furthermore, focusing on learning about the “other” reduces or even eliminates the need for self-reflection. Culture then becomes a confounding variable that must be controlled for by providers from the dominant paradigm. The notion of mastering the knowledge base needed to work with all cultures is both arrogant and unethical. Arrogant in the elevation of individual ability over the infinite nuance and expression that is culture. Unethical in that the ramifications of practicing social work from a place of expertise rather than collaboration can limit engagement to the point of damage rather than empowerment. In essence, to fully support the clients served, social workers must practice a way of being rather than attempt to master the elements of individual context. Cultural humility requires stepping outside the individual identity to honor the unique experience of others (McGee-Avila, 2018). This is particularly salient when considering the demands and scope of child welfare.

1 The purpose of this narrative is to reflect on a training that took place across the state of  
2 Kentucky for child welfare employees to promote the practice of cultural humility. A discussion  
3 of the origin, triumphs, and challenges found in this training will be provided. The narrative  
4 concludes with considerations and implications for the broader use of training to further the  
5 embrace of cultural humility as the normative frame for child welfare specifically and social  
6 work practice in general.

## Origins

10 Child welfare presents a myriad of experiences and challenges for social work practitioners.  
11 Departments including foster care, adoptions, investigations, and ongoing case management  
12 reflect a broad continuum of skills and expertise. These departments are staffed with individuals  
13 who bring with them unique life contexts and perspectives who are then charged to engage with  
14 clients who bring their own unique life contexts and perspectives. Reports of abuse and neglect,  
15 navigating the foster care system, and supporting those in need of family assistance (like  
16 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] benefits or Temporary Cash Assistance For  
17 Needy Families [TANF]) are the daily fare for professionals struggling to thrive under the  
18 weight of increasing caseloads and decreasing funding. For the past several decades, social  
19 workers in Kentucky have struggled to respond to increases in the number of drug overdose  
20 deaths, a growing prevalence of chronic homelessness, food insecurity, poverty, and pervasive  
21 health disparities experienced by diverse racial and ethnic groups (Foundation for a Healthy  
22 Kentucky, 2016). Data substantiates disparate outcomes for families of color within the child  
23 welfare system. All things being equal, outcomes are not equal. When added to an increasing  
24 rate of turnover for those charged to serve vulnerable families throughout the state,  
25 disproportionality becomes a crisis. In an effort to respond to both challenges, cabinet officials  
26 sought help to better equip staff and better support families. The outcome was the development  
27 of a two-day training featuring cultural humility as a core competency for direct practice.  
28 Cultural humility creates a space of respectful curiosity where the client can be genuinely  
29 known. Issues of power, social injustice, discrimination, and bias at all system levels can be  
30 addressed and dismantled collaboratively, making it a construct ideally suited for child welfare  
31 (Foronda et al., 2016; Hook et al., 2013; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

33 The focus of this workshop was to enhance the workers' experience of understanding culture in  
34 a way that would highlight 1) the diverse context and experience of culture, 2) the social versus  
35 biological construct of race, and 3) the history of contemporary systems grounded in false  
36 narratives about race. Woven together, these elements serve to create a foundation that explains  
37 the perpetuation of inequity. The training asserts that this authentic level of understanding and  
38 engagement not only honors the stories of client and practitioner, but by doing so, moves the  
39 relationship to the space of trust necessary to partner for sustainable change. In short, cultural  
40 humility can actually expedite the work of individuals overwhelmed with mounting caseloads.

42 From that foundation, cultural humility is then offered as a way of engaging others from a place  
43 of genuine respect and curiosity. Individual and organizational assessments were included with  
44 an iterative reflection process to promote the tenets of cultural humility.

## **Structure**

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3 Using group dialogue, videos, and facilitated conversations, the training was provided over two  
4 days and featured a participatory model facilitated by two trainers, one African American and  
5 one white. The pairing of the trainers was intentional, ensuring that equity was found not only in  
6 content, but in leadership as well. To date, ten trainings with an average of 28 participants each  
7 have been held throughout the state in both rural and urban areas. Pre and post assessments were  
8 completed by all participants with ongoing assessments occurring for six months following the  
9 initial training.

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11 Participants were all employees of the state working within the cabinet for families and children.  
12 Roles ranged from mental health contractors to direct practitioners to program and regional  
13 administrators. The distinct roles were factored into the ongoing assessment process but were not  
14 used as separation during the training. Participants were instead grouped into random  
15 “communities” for the duration of the training and compelled to process content and complete  
16 group reflections within the designated community. The end result was connectedness that  
17 bridged the soft barrier of choosing what one knows in favor of that which one cannot control.  
18 This process was intentional, designed to reflect the experience of clients when they are  
19 compelled to build relationships with workers they do not know and quite frankly would not  
20 choose. The training concluded with a request for participants to commit to three months of  
21 applying the principles of cultural humility to their daily practice, identifying three specific  
22 things they can do to walk out this commitment.

## **Triumphs and Challenges**

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26 As previously stated, this training was conducted throughout the state in both urban and rural  
27 areas. This afforded unique experiences and challenges with regard to audience and context. In  
28 rural areas of Kentucky, diversity is quite limited, which is reflected in those working for the  
29 cabinet and those served by the cabinet. Subsequently, the racial demographics of the respective  
30 groups were overwhelmingly white. In the urban locations, the racial composition afforded  
31 greater diversity, but failed to reflect the population at large, thus substantiating what has  
32 become the norm for child welfare: Staff is disproportionately white, and families are  
33 disproportionately not.

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35 Participants are required to complete diversity training as a mandate of their continuing  
36 education requirement. This specific training was offered as a means to complete this  
37 requirement, which gave individuals a voice in their participation. That said, they are compelled  
38 to engage in the content, so it would be remiss to conclude that participation was purely  
39 voluntary, stemming from a desire to learn more and do more.

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41 The complexity of and confusion regarding the material covered surfaced early in each training.  
42 Unpacking the false narratives of race that foster climates of racism is a process, and though two  
43 full days is an extraordinary amount of time compared to other training formats, this process  
44 required moving quickly into the complex, awkward, and painful conversations crafted to shift  
45 participants to a space of humility versus competence. Pushback ranged from vocally disputing

1 facts presented to silently ignoring the content. In some cases, the pushback was present through  
2 the entirety of the training. In others, the pushback was random. In still others, the pushback  
3 crossed lines of appropriateness to include the use of racial slurs when sharing instances of  
4 racism they'd witnessed or the acknowledgement of the white trainer's credentials while  
5 ignoring the comparable credentials of the African American trainer.

6  
7 A consistent feature of the individual trainings was the phenomena of the side bar  
8 acknowledgements, conversations, and "Aha!" moments. As previously asserted, the material  
9 and ensuing conversations were difficult. Acknowledging the contemporary existence of racism  
10 and bias flies in the face of the narrative of sustained societal change found in textbooks used on  
11 a daily basis. For white participants it was regularly shocking. For African American participants  
12 it was simply stating the obvious based on lived experience. No matter how obvious, the pain of  
13 wading back into the endless loop of explaining what it's like to drive, shop, and live while  
14 being black was often palpable. These polarized experiences regularly lead to the initiating of  
15 somewhat private conversations with the trainers on breaks, or when leaving for lunch, or at the  
16 conclusion of the day. The sharing of deeply personal stories and experiences had become the  
17 norm. We were given an immediate opportunity to practice cultural humility, to be fully present  
18 in a difficult moment, and to begin the process of building trust between strangers.

### **Outcomes**

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22 The training protocol features pre/post efficacy assessments focusing on the tenets of cultural  
23 humility and the implications of racism and bias in child welfare. These assessments are  
24 administered at the beginning and conclusion of the two-day format. In addition, the project  
25 features a six-month follow-up which will not be complete until spring of 2019. During this  
26 period, participants will be contacted every six weeks with articles, videos, and support material  
27 to encourage remaining in a space of cultural humility. At the conclusion of the six-month  
28 window, the preliminary assessments will be re-administered and evaluated using an anonymous  
29 pre-numbered identification system.

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31 Pre and post efficacy assessments administered during the trainings indicate growth in  
32 understanding of content and the power and positionality of self. Of particular interest is the  
33 increased belief that race impacts practice and the shift in perceptions regarding the need to  
34 speak truth to power regarding agency issues that challenge client stability. Sustaining both  
35 markers could make a positive impact in both worker effectiveness and client restoration. Data  
36 gathered on the planned six-month follow-up will determine sustainability.

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38 In addition to quantifiable assessments, narrative evaluation was afforded to all participants.  
39 Comments ranged from typical expressions of gratitude for a good learning opportunity to  
40 concerns for sustainability throughout the agency. Several participants shared frustration that  
41 though they were degreed professionals, they lacked awareness of the history and context  
42 provided in the training.

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44 "I'm 45 years old . . . I have two degrees . . . I've been doing this work the better part of  
45 my life . . . how is it I don't know these things?"

1 Others spoke to the uncomfortable nature of conversations about race and privilege,  
2 acknowledging a false sense of awareness.

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4 “I prided myself on not being racist, not being biased. But I never considered my  
5 privilege. I’m still not sure how to handle it but at least I can see the elephant in the room  
6 now.”

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8 A few participants spoke to the very vulnerable nature of the dialogue and the fear that personal  
9 narratives would be dismissed or diminished even in a space committed to the contrary.

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11 “For most people in the room, things shared were just stories about other people. For me,  
12 it was real, and it was painful. I know conversations like this are important and they  
13 should happen. I hope people understand how hard sharing can be when you don’t know  
14 how people will respond.”

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16 Considering the norm that those who are dissatisfied or unhappy will typically share prolifically,  
17 the fact that to date no one has provided a negative comment is of particular interest.

### **Implications**

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21 Though the tenets of cultural humility resonate with the core commitments of the profession of  
22 social work, it remains a practice frequently taught as an add-on skill in favor of primary  
23 adherence to cultural competence. As more programs shift to a model of humility, the theoretical  
24 and pragmatic divide between new and seasoned practitioners grows. To ensure clients and  
25 communities are afforded viable, consistent, and ethical interventions, cultural humility must  
26 move from the academy to direct practice with intention and direction. One method of  
27 movement is the provision of training for current practitioners by those preparing future  
28 practitioners. The benefit is two-fold: 1) Those individuals with an existing and proven  
29 commitment to the empowerment of others gain a practice lens that broadens their skill set by  
30 focusing on ways of being rather than depth of knowledge, and 2) faculty engage in the practice  
31 community by entering the community and leaving the silos that define higher education.

### **Conclusion**

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35 While demographic information is somewhat limited due to the high frequency of turn over,  
36 studies indicate that over 50% of child welfare workers are white and female, most with several  
37 years of experience and educational backgrounds beyond high school (Albrecht & Keen, 2009).  
38 Layered on this statistic is the pervasive myth that the majority of people who utilize services  
39 from or are involved with the child welfare system are persons of color, many of whom are  
40 simply lazy (Drake et al., 2009). In reality, data demonstrates that the highest rate of participants  
41 in government assisted programs are children, attributable to Medicaid. Of those receiving  
42 Medicaid, 77% were in a home with an adult who was employed, and when considered by race,  
43 white people made up the greatest number of recipients (Cole, 2019).

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45 The lived experiences of poverty, racism, bias, chronic exposure to trauma and violence, and

1 addiction, to name only a few, create a frame of difference that regularly separates the client  
2 experience from the practitioner experience (Albrecht & Keen, 2009). Though difference does  
3 not by definition equate to greater or less than, the differences experienced in terms of gender,  
4 race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, history of substance use, history of unmanaged mental  
5 health issues, and/or generational concerns can create barriers insurmountable when challenged  
6 by cultural competence. This discomfort of difference and the weight of an unmanageable  
7 caseload can lead even the most compassionate of workers to deem a client unknowable and  
8 ultimately non-compliant. Cultural humility lifts the burden of absolute knowledge and replaces  
9 it with the call to honor and be present. This lens cannot be the exclusive purview of new  
10 practitioners but must instead become the standard by which all client systems are engaged. To  
11 ensure the consistency of respect grounded in reflection, education must leave the academy and  
12 root itself in the training rooms of existing agencies.

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