

PURSUING HUMILITY

By Amber Joiner-Hill, April 2019

Sometimes it seems like the word “culture” is used in so many contexts, that it can refer to everything and nothing at the same time. In many conversations, I’ve heard “culture” used to describe anything that’s different from a norm. What we tend to forget, though, is that there is no one norm. What is common to you can be completely foreign to others and therefore the definition of culture can change depending on who you ask. I believe that the following definition is narrow enough to have relevant meaning, but encompassing enough to acknowledge that we all hold many identities—*a set of shared values, beliefs, practices, and customs that are specific to a group of people, community, organization, or society.*

In the social work profession specifically, we are taught to be culturally competent, which means that you are aware of cultural norms other than your own and you keep them in mind when engaging with clients and communities. With enough education and exposure, one can gain a firm understanding of those who are different from him/herself and then master the art of working with said culture.

However, some flaws with the concept of cultural competency are (1) it tends to portray White, English-speaking, Christian, heterosexual, and able-bodied individuals as the default that all other identities are to be assessed against, (2) to simply be aware of another culture does not mean that you understand the unique experiences of a client and how their culture may create barriers to opportunities, (3) it implies that there is a finite end point to learning, and (4) transformative change is not required; social injustices are not questioned or ended as a result of being competent.

Then I learned about cultural humility.

It can be difficult to admit that we don’t know everything, or that we made a mistake, or even scarier, we were wrong about something. When my colleague first told me that I needed to rethink my promotion of cultural competency and learn about humility, I clutched my pearls and prepared for a debate. I had allowed myself to believe that I had it all figured out. After experiencing a diverse set of schooling, employment, and travel, I thought that I had mastered the skills of working with any kind of person in any setting. Through research, though, I learned that such proficiency does not exist and that while my personal experiences do have value, I need(ed) to humble myself. Being knowledgeable about other cultures made me feel good and perhaps even a little self-righteous, but I wasn’t really thinking critically or in a transformative manner.

Cultural humility is a lifelong process of self-reflection and evaluation, institutional and individual accountability, and critique of power imbalances. To work toward humility is a dynamic experience with no endpoint. Although the concepts of cultural competency and cultural humility were introduced around the same time (late 90s), it is not clear why the fields of medicine, public health, and social work chose to primarily adopt and promote competency. However, now that we know better we should do better.

I’ve only just begun to pursue cultural humility myself and already identified some obstacles that I’ll need to work through.

I need to hold myself more accountable and challenge power imbalances that I benefit from. I cannot have power without taking it away from someone else and that’s a really uncomfortable space to be in. While it doesn’t take much effort to list the ways in which my gender or race have and will create challenges

in my life, it would be irresponsible and selfish of me to not acknowledge that my education, nationality, sexual orientation, physical ability, and probably other attributes all give me the privilege to confront power imbalances that create barriers for others.

I encourage my fellow social workers—those micro and macro—and other human service providers to not get too comfortable with ourselves and our current approach to working with individuals and communities. There will *always* be a need for internal dialogue, systems to dismantle, and room for growth.

Recommended resources:

Read: Doctors Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-Garcia provided a detailed introduction to the concept and application of cultural humility in [their article](#) *Cultural Humility Versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education*.

Watch: Juliana Mosley offers an engaging presentation about cultural humility during this [TedTalk](#).