

# Cultural Competency

**“If you came here to help me, then you are wasting my time....  
But if you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then  
let us work together.” -Lilla Watson**

“As members of the human race, we have universal similarities. As members of different racial, ethnic, gender, religious, (age) cohort, community, and other groups, we also develop differences. The particular configuration and relative influence of each of these systems contributes to the diversity which characterizes individual human identities and behaviors.” (Miley, O’Melia & DuBois, 1998).

## What is culture?

Culture consists of learned values, beliefs, rituals, traditions, customs, and ideas that are shared by a group of people. These common characteristics guide the way of life, emotional responses, physical responses, and worldview of the group.

## Examples of cultural groups include:

- Family - Spiritual Affiliations/Beliefs
- Race
- Gender
- Ethnic Background
- Socio-Economic Status
- Music
- Political Party
- Recreational Activities

## Differences among us:

Through the many variations that could make up any one of us in the above examples and general definitions, it is obvious to see that there is bound to be several forms of cultures within our communities. Some of these differences are much more easily identifiable than others.

**Race:** A group of people who perceive themselves and are perceived by others as possessing **distinctive hereditary traits** (such as body type and skin color) (Ore, 2000).

**Ethnicity:** A group of people who perceive themselves and are perceived by others as **sharing cultural traits** (such as language, religion, family customs, food preferences, etc.) (Ore, 2000).

To put it more simply, race is something we cannot choose, and ethnicity composes aspects of a cultural group(s) that we identify with by choice.

### **Power:**

By nature, we as humans are prone to have conflicts of opinions and beliefs. The main distinction between racial prejudice and racism is the **POWER** to enforce those biased beliefs and opinions. But what is power? While power refers to many different things, its essence is “the capacity to bring about intended effects” (Gray-Little & Burkes, 1983). Psychologically, this refers to your capacity to define how you perceive and interpret the world. Interpersonally, power refers to your ability to make self-determined decisions, vs the degree to which you feel like you have no choice. Applied to an analysis of social interactions and structures organized by hierarchies and dominance (such as who is in charge/makes the decision/enforces the decisions):

“Power is defined as, ‘ability to get what one needs; the ability to influence how others think, feel, act, or believe’ and the ability to influence the distribution of resources in a social system such as a family, organization, community, or society’ {Gutierrez, 1991}” (Miley, et al., 1998).

If power is the ability to get what you want, **powerlessness** is the lack of access to resources, vulnerability to social institutions and societal forces, and economic impairments.

“Oppression refers to ‘relations of domination and exploitation – economic, social, and psychological – between individuals; between groups and classes within and beyond societies; and globally, between entire societies’ {Gil, 1994}” (Miley et al., 1998).

**Racism:** Discriminatory thoughts, beliefs, and actions based on the assignment of an individual or group to a racial classification (Hutchinson, 1999).

**Ethnocentrism:** Considering one's own culture as superior and judging culturally different practices (beliefs, values, behavior) by the standards and norms of one's own culture (Hutchinson, 1999).

**Prejudice:** The tendency to prejudge or hold preconceived opinions that are untested but accepted as truth (Ore, 2000).

Here it is important to note that ethnocentrism and prejudice differs from racism due to the fact that racism entails **actions** meant to oppress others that are different.

### **Three Sources of Oppression**

- 1. Institutional:** Formal structures such as laws, policies, traditions or practices (e.g. racial profiling; disproportionate police contact with minorities, the school-to-prison pipeline).
- 2. Personally-Mediated:** The ways in which each person perpetuates or validates structures of unequal resources/decision-making power directly or indirectly (i.e. not hiring someone because you believe they not competent based on a major identity marker such as their gender, race or class; laughing at jokes about minorities; making jokes about minorities, etc.).
- 3. Internalized:** Believing that the stereotypes about one or many of your major identities are true (i.e. dismissing your emotions as valid because you are a woman and therefore "overly emotional").

## Culturally Competent Service Providers

Every person we meet has characteristics that are similar to our own; we all have skin, organs, bones, and so on. Each person is also different from us: we all have skin, but the colors can differ between people; we all have skills and gifts, but they are never the same when seasoned upon souls. In order to effectively practice cultural competency, volunteers and workers need to understand, internalize, and employ the following values:

**Acceptance:** respecting the clients' values, belief systems, and frame of reference as worthy of dignity and respect.

**Individualization:** workers must see each client/client system as unique, and avoid basing judgments and expectations on what clients in similar circumstances experienced – do not provide the same, standard services to all clients.

**Nonjudgmental:** workers do not evaluate clients as good or bad, or apply their own values and perceptions to client situations.

**Objectivity:** workers must not allow personal values, beliefs, biases, and practices to be projected upon the clients, but instead separate the "worker self," which empowers clients to choose their own value systems, from the individual's personal beliefs.

**Self-determination:** workers should help the client/client system find all the available options, know the consequences (both positive and negative) of each option, and choose a method they decided upon without influence from the worker.

**Knowledge of cultures:** before providing services to clients of any particular background, a worker should know the history, general beliefs, social norms, etc., so as to interact in a meaningful way that demonstrates awareness of issues facing the racial/ethnic group, an

understanding of the culture (worldview, way of life, norms, etc.) and a base of information that arms the worker with available resources.

### **Cultural Strengths:**

“Cultural belief systems and behavioral outlook influence the ideas, customs, and skills of people. For ethnic minorities, the cultural element reinforces positive functioning through family support systems, self-identity and self-esteem, and ethnic philosophy of living. These cultural resource strengths are coping mechanisms during stress and crisis” (Miley et. al., 1998).

### **Cultural Humility:**

#### **A Compassionate Approach to the Lifelong work of Developing Competency**

- Adopt a humble attitude to the work of building your own competency
- Be reflective of your own biases and sources of visible and invisible privilege
- Cultivate an openness to the cultures and realities of others
- Embody a willingness to listen and continually learn

### **References:**

Gray-Little, B., & Burks, N. (1983). Power and satisfaction in marriage: A review and critique.

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Miley, K., O'Melia, M., and DuBois, B. (1998). *Generalist Social Work Practice: An Empowerment*

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